

*Family and Givenness as Mystery*

In Chapter 2, we looked at the question of what family might mean via the notion of the family tie. We examined this tie with respect to its unreflective, immediate and everyday character, as having strong implications for acting and as something to which members hold one another answerable. In reading *Antigone*, however, we discovered that, although the tie seems self-evident and need not be named, it is not obvious what precisely the tie implies for who the family members are and how they should act. Thus, the tie leads to conflict.

Presupposed in this understanding of a tie is that family is a distinct sphere with specific responsibilities regarding one's behaviour. This presupposition was critically questioned by going into discussion with other interpretations of *Antigone*, especially Judith Butler's. We discussed whether and how ethics can take into account the notion of an intuited bond without falling into the trap of essentialising – that is, of fixing contingent cultural norms into normative standards beyond debate. In Hegel's view of family and, more clearly, in David Ciavatta's interpretation of it, we found ways of expressing what the family tie could mean which cannot be characterised as 'fixing'. To the contrary, their analyses are complex and ambiguous. As such, they deepened our initial approach to family as mystery.

Finally, the idea of the unnameable family tie was explored with respect to its obvious character and transcendent anchoring, evoked by Antigone's claim that she is acting on the basis of divine law. Ciavatta elaborated Antigone's actions as exemplifying the unreflective, immediate kind of acting that is characteristic of family. This reading is inspired by Hegel's understanding of the divine law as something of which one is intuitively and not consciously aware. It is not the result of conscious deliberation, but of accepting an immediate appeal. Others criticise these views of Antigone's acting as 'familial' and therefore unreflective and point to its nonconformism and rebelliousness. This disagreement raised the question

of whether Antigone's heroic status is necessarily reduced by what is clearly a unique sensitivity to divine law. Is it not rebellious to invoke the family tie in public? All family members are answerable to the tie, but Antigone is the only one who responds to it immediately.

The question of why it is precisely in the everyday setting of family life that this experience of divine duty arises gave the impulse for a first exploration of the notion of givenness. The given character of family was also touched upon at various moments in our earlier analyses of the family tie. Butler's criticism of the idea that family is a distinct sphere concerns precisely the suggestion that it is given or something natural, outside the political realm and thus of history. In Hegel's view of family, givenness is addressed when Hegel explores the difficult place of the natural in family as a moral phenomenon. Ciavatta reformulates this difficulty as one of spiritualising nature, which flows from the special connectedness of family where individual identity does not entail separation from the other. Givenness also resonates with the immediate, quasi-automatic character of Antigone's actions that Ciavatta highlights. In our final discussion on the divine character of the duty implied in family as found in *Antigone*, we then introduced the notion of givenness more emphatically. This could express, we suggested, Antigone's experience of the family tie as inescapable and as implying moral duties of a divine nature. Antigone experiences a call in the family setting that puts her in the position to respect it. This call is nowhere formulated in an explicit rule that, for instance, family members are responsible for honouring their dead relatives. It is unwritten but therefore seems self-evident, 'written into the very nature of things', as Ciavatta argues. This makes one wonder why not all family members respond to the call of this tie. Do they not experience the family tie as given? Maybe they feel the appeal of the tie but consciously reject it. At least at the end of the play, the audience is left with the question of whether one should regard the family tie as given in the strong sense of implying a moral duty of divine origin. Antigone's acting on this tie is not presented as straightforwardly exemplary. The spectator might easily sympathise with the moments in which Ismene and Creon reject the call of the tie in favour of their own lives or the well-being of the city.

With these reflections on how the characters in *Antigone* act on the tie as something given, and in particular as a given in everyday life, we have entered a field that needs to be explored as such. In Chapter 1, we introduced givenness and dependence as the central lenses for investigating what family might mean in a moral sense. We use these terms as the two main headings that could indicate the most important challenges family confronts us with in our time and context. They seem crucial to understanding current controversies about

family. Givenness is a difficult aspect of life in a time that emphasises the importance of choice and human freedom and our power to change things, especially in the relational sphere. In Chapter 2, Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone* exposed these difficulties of treating 'the other side of freedom' with due attention in ethics. The great interest in Hegel's views in our time – despite his seemingly outdated understanding of gender, for example – also indicated the topical importance of discussing the theme of givenness. In this chapter, we explore possible constructive elaborations of this givenness of family, as well as views that criticise it in particular because of its conservative and fixing associations. They emphasise the 'made' character of family. Our aim is to find out how much weight the concept of givenness can bear in ethical reflection on family. By this, we mean taking the experiences behind the term 'given' into account without ending up in the deadlock that opposes givenness to family as 'made'. We look for a different understanding of givenness beyond this opposition that can emerge precisely by reflecting on the phenomenon of family itself, viewed as mystery.

Again, we will start by stepping outside the contemporary debates on the given or made character of family and analyse artistic expressions of family. We will discuss two paintings of the Holy Family by Rembrandt. In these paintings, ordinary family life – the everyday reality of life in Rembrandt's day – is readily apparent. This ordinary family is painted as an image of the Holy Family. The ordinary family seems worthy as such of representing the Holy Family. Life as given in its everyday character is taken seriously as revealing something beyond it, a surplus of meaning. We will take this as our first access to the theme of 'givenness'.

## Rembrandt's Image of an Ordinary Family Scene

### *The Role of the Ordinary in Rembrandt's Holy Family*

Among the great paintings of the Holy Family, those of Rembrandt stand out because of their expression of intimate domesticity.<sup>1</sup> Especially in two paintings of Mary, the baby Jesus, and, in the background, Joseph from

<sup>1</sup> Part of this chapter elaborates aspects discussed in my article "Telling Images: On the Value of a "Strong Image" for Theological Ethics", in *Die Zeit der Bilder: Ikonische Repräsentation und Temporalität*, ed. by Michael Moxter and Markus Firchow (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 144–60. On Rembrandt's Holy Family scenes, compare H. Sachs, 'Familie, Heilige', in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, Vol. 2, ed. by Engelbert Kirschbaum and Wolfgang Braunfels (Freiburg: Herder, 1990), 4–7, at 6–7; Adam Adolf, 'Heilige Familie, I. Verehrung', in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, Vol. 4, ed. by Michael Buchberger and Walter Kasper (Freiburg: Herder, 1995), 1276–7, at 1277.



Figure 3.1 Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *The Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain*, 1646 (Kassel)

1645 (*The Holy Family with Angels*, St Petersburg, see Figure 3.2) and 1646 (*The Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain*, Kassel, see Figure 3.1), the viewer is struck first of all by the realistic, everyday character of the scene and of the figures.<sup>2</sup> We see a real mother taking care of her child by attentively watching it sleep in a cradle or by lifting it from the cradle and holding it to her breast, perhaps to comfort it. The setting is simple and sober. The wooden floor is quite visible. A single piece of furniture is positioned prominently on it: the child's wicker basket with its blankets and sheets. In the painting 'with frame', the woman is barefoot, sitting on a small sofa. A fire is burning on the floor close to the cradle, and a cat basks in its warmth. In the dim background of both paintings, the figure of a man bending forward with a woodworking tool in his hands can be described. The presence of other tools at the back of the room gives a good

<sup>2</sup> For brevity's sake, I refer to *The Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain* as the Kassel painting or the Kassel Holy Family and to *The Holy Family with Angels* as the St Petersburg Holy Family. Apart from these two, which were painted in close temporal conjunction, there are also other Holy Family paintings by Rembrandt, but these are less relevant to our theme of the relationship between the holy and the everyday.



Figure 3.2 Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *The Holy Family with Angels*, 1645 (St Petersburg) (Photo by Alexander Koksharov, © The State Hermitage Museum)

clue to his occupation. We can see his workshop, which also seems to be the location of ordinary family life.

The St Petersburg Holy Family contains very non-ordinary elements no less prominently as well which lead the viewer into the 'holy' character of

the scene. A group of little angels on the left – chubby children with birdlike wings – is the most prominent of these elements. One of them is depicted completely en face with his child's body and is stretching out his arms like a crucifix figure.<sup>3</sup> He looks down, like the other angels and the woman, at the child asleep in the basket. The presence of the angels leaves no doubt about the family painted here. Consequently, the man in the background should be Joseph. He is bending under a heavy beam or yoke resting on his shoulder, thus recalling another scene in the passion narrative: Jesus (or Simon of Cyrene) stumbling towards Golgotha weighed down by the heavy burden of the cross.<sup>4</sup> The woman must be Mary. She is sitting beside the cradle, which she touches with her right hand while holding a large book in her left hand, undoubtedly a Bible. The light falls on the opened book. Mary seems to have been reading it when she turns to the crib to rearrange the blankets and then looks at the sleeping child.<sup>5</sup> She raises her eyebrows, which makes her look surprised.

Similar obvious signs of the holy character of the scene are not present in the Kassel painting. Here we simply see Mary tenderly holding Jesus and Joseph in the background, working with his carpenter's tools, albeit in a similar position as in the other painting. Their faces are painted at a distance, so their expressions are not clearly visible. The look on the woman's face seems to be one more of worry than of surprise. If we follow her gaze, she is looking into the fire below at her feet, not at the child she holds close to herself. The child is standing on her lap on one foot, and the sole of the other is turned towards the viewer, while the child stretches out his arms to the woman's neck. Her hands are folded around the middle of the child, crossing each other as if in prayer. Apart from this sober scene, another element catches the eye: the scene is surrounded by a painted picture frame and a large curtain fastened on it. The curtain is painted as if it has been moved aside.

As such, the frame and curtain attract attention, but they are even more remarkable in comparison with the St Petersburg painting. What do the

<sup>3</sup> Compare Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann, *Rembrandt: The Holy Family* (St Petersburg: Gerson Lectures Foundation, 1995), 17n28.

<sup>4</sup> The depiction of Jesus (or Simon of Cyrene) carrying the cross is especially clear from Rembrandt's 'Drawing in Bayonne', a compositional study for his painting *The Holy Family with Angels*. Haverkamp-Begemann suggests that the beam looks like a yoke, thus recalling a text like Matt. 11:30: 'For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (*Rembrandt*, 18).

<sup>5</sup> As Haverkamp-Begemann points out, this combination of looking and reading is also present in another painting by Rembrandt (*Le ménage du Menuisier*) where the figure of St Anna, with a Bible on her lap, pushes aside the cloths covering Jesus in order to better see him (*Rembrandt*, 15, 19). In both cases, this 'reading and seeing' can be interpreted as a 'recognition motif' representing the recognition of the Christ child by Mary or Anna upon her reading of the coming Saviour in the Bible (16, 19n23).



frame and curtain add to the painting? Whatever further interpretations may be given, they primarily emphasise that the image is a painting, a work of art. This emphasis makes the viewer of the painting aware of his or her own act of watching. It is a specific kind of watching: watching an image, a painting, a piece of art. Why should the viewer be reminded of the image character of the painting? It seems to be making a statement in comparison to paintings without such a framing. Does the scene itself contain any clue as to the reasons for this framing? The scene is remarkably 'realistic' in its unadorned everydayness. At first sight, before the figure of the man with the woodworking tools has been described in the dim background, no specific details call for attention or give a clue to what kind of scene or family is present here. The frame changes this experience. It contrasts, or so it seems, with the everydayness and unemphatic character of the scene. The frame turns it into an emphatic, conscious image. It may seem ordinary, but it should be watched intensely as long as the curtain is pulled aside, which may be for only a short time. The frame thus at least calls for special awareness of the image which – precisely because of its apparently realistic character – may at first sight seem all too well known. It invites further thinking about why such a simple everyday scene is deemed worthy of being painted. The frame and open curtain thus make the viewer aware that this painting is more than just a very apt expression of intimate domesticity.

One may wonder, however, whether this framing of the painting is enough to make the viewer aware of the specific, even holy character of the family that is depicted. Unsurprisingly, the first scientific catalogue of the painting gallery of Kassel in Germany from 1888 gives a double title to the work: "The Holy Family" also known as "The Woodcutter's Family".<sup>6</sup> In a religious context, this question of whether an everyday family scene may be enough to express and evoke the Holy Family is a normative question as well. Does the everyday somehow do justice to the worthiness of the Holy Family? Or does it lessen it, domesticate it, undo its holiness? In 1875, the Swiss art historian Jacob Burckhardt expressed a criticism of this kind when he remarked about the painting: 'if this is not a profanation, what would be?'<sup>7</sup>

Recently, however, the art historian Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann questioned the aura of domesticity and ordinariness that the scenes of

<sup>6</sup> "Die Heilige Familie", bekannt unter dem Namen "die Holzhackerfamilie", cited in Wolfgang Kemp, *Rembrandt: Die Heilige Familie, oder die Kunst, einen Vorhang zu lüften* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1986), 6 from the catalogue of the 'Königlichen Gemäldegalerie zu Kassel' from 1888 by Otto Eisemann, 145.

<sup>7</sup> 'Wenn dies keine Profanation ist, was wäre noch eine?', cited in Kemp, *Rembrandt*, 6.

the 1645 and 1646 paintings seem to have.<sup>8</sup> In his view, Rembrandt is much more interested in telling the story of the Bible and incorporating motives from traditional iconography.<sup>9</sup> What is more, the ‘delimitation of space’ by means of the frame and curtain in the Kassel painting is something Rembrandt uses only for religious scenes (23). Haverkamp-Begemann interprets it as emphasising the difference between our world and that of the Bible. Here, it may add a revelatory impulse. The curtain that is pushed aside reveals to the viewer what had been veiled (19). It may be seen as a parallel to the woman figure in the St Petersburg version, who looks up from her reading of the Bible and sees the cradle, thus revealing the special status of the child and relating it to the biblical revelation. In Haverkamp-Begemann’s interpretation, the ordinariness of the scene serves its religious meaning: Rembrandt ‘used the quotidian to make the spiritual persuasive’ (19). Haverkamp-Begemann does not, however, clarify the sense in which precisely this everyday character makes the spiritual ‘persuasive’. Why is the ‘spiritual’ not depicted in a ‘spiritual’ way, for example, more in the style of the angels appearing in the St Petersburg Holy Family?

The art historian Wolfgang Kemp, on the other hand, does interpret the painting with frame as remarkably quotidian. He explains this as a sign of the Protestant context in which Rembrandt was working.<sup>10</sup> As Catholic painters also turned to the intimate and anecdotal in the post-Reformation Low Countries, the Protestant perspective had to be expressed by leaving out explicit references to holiness and by an increase in the ‘profane and everyday elements’ (17). Moreover, religious scenes seemed less suited to private use by that time, which may have influenced the depiction of the Holy Family as a painting of the genre of the interior paintings (19–20). As regards the framing of the painting, Kemp argues it does not have the grand, festive, revelatory working of similar veiling and unveiling constructions of earlier periods (63). Here, revelation is ‘private’ (67). The size of the painting adds to this. It is very small; one can only see it as a single viewer by coming close to the painting. One then observes an intimate scene which breaths a ‘completeness’ (68) as it indicates and connects the elementary facts of life: human being and animal, husband and wife, old and young, a house, warmth, food, care and labour. Intimacy or privacy, however, means that it

<sup>8</sup> Haverkamp-Begemann, *Rembrandt*, 12, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Haverkamp-Begemann gives several examples of these traditional motives in these and other holy families by Rembrandt: Joseph asleep, Mary and the child asleep, Mary holding the foot of Jesus (*hypsilotera*; *Rembrandt*, 10), *Maria lattante*, Mary sitting on the ground as the virgin of humility (12), Joseph making a yoke (18).

<sup>10</sup> Kemp, *Rembrandt*, 15–17.



is not easy for the viewer to relate to it; the scene is closed. It is within these dimensions that the frame and curtain receive a deeper meaning, that of mediating: they emphasise the inner and the outer, but by doing so also bring the outside, the viewer, into relation with the intimate scene (68–9). Their function is thus a double one: they increase the intimacy of the scene and personally invite the viewer to behold it.

*The Relation between the Sacred and the Ordinary and Its Moral Implications*

Viewing *The Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain* side by side with *The Holy Family with Angels* enables us to pick up where we left off with *Antigone* at the end of Chapter 2. There, we reflected on the divine character Antigone claims for the law that rules her acting, which is explained only in terms of being 'unwritten'. This law is presented already in the first scene as a self-evident duty, which is somehow implied in the everyday phenomenon of the family tie. Antigone invokes this law over against Ismene and Creon, but does not make it explicit in the sense of a clear rule that formulates this family duty in general. At this point, we introduced the language of givenness: Antigone experiences family as given whereas Ismene does so only at a later stage and not at all for Creon. *Antigone* shows that not all family members are sensitive to the sacred character of the moral call implied in this everyday phenomenon. They react differently to the family reality. They might hear the call but deny it or may not even be aware of it. When faced with their interdependence, they do not respect it. Thus, family does not awaken any attitude of piety in Creon. That does not, however, do away with the emphatic staging of the issue of the burial of a traitor as a family issue in which divine law comes to light. The play confronts the observer with the question of why family is a setting in which one might hear the divine call or, in Marcel's formulation, 'glimpse' the bond with the sacred. These relations between the ordinary and the divine resonate with how we introduced Rembrandt's Holy Family paintings. Antigone could be said to act on the basis of something in ordinary life, the family tie as a 'given' that is expressed in her pious response, which acknowledges a divine call implied in it. In Rembrandt's paintings, the ordinary and the divine touch as well. It is this that forms the starting point for our further explorations of the notion of givenness. The way in which Rembrandt depicts the Holy Family can be interpreted as a way of expressing the experience of givenness. Even without angels or other explicitly religious elements – as in the Kassel painting – the sober ordinary family scene seems to have a kind of power to

express and to make an appeal that makes it a worthy depiction of the Holy Family. Linked to this painting, givenness becomes a term to indicate a surplus of meaning that certain phenomena might express. The phenomenon of family, condensed in the scene of this painting, invites the observer to look differently at the ordinary.

What precisely do we suggest when taking Rembrandt's Holy Family paintings as a starting point to explore givenness? The realistic appearance of Rembrandt's Holy Family paintings could easily be regarded as expressing a high valuation of ordinary family life. Givenness then seems to mean that ordinary family life as such is something good or at least something that should be taken seriously as a meaningful place where the sacred might be found. We also noticed the frame and curtain of the Kassel painting, however. Apparently, these are also necessary, in addition to the realistic scene, for inviting the viewer to look differently at the ordinary. Family as such is not enough to evoke the holy, but framed as an unveiled scene, as Haverkamp-Begemann argues, this ordinary scene could indeed serve to make the 'spiritual persuasive'. Kemp's view of the presence of the curtain indicates another direction of interpretation. The curtain emphasises the quotidian and domestic and also fulfils a mediating role by relating the world of the viewer to the world of the intimate scene, which would remain closed off if the curtain is absent. Do these interpretations, though, take into account the provocative character of the painting, as expressed in Burckhardt's objection to it because of its profane style? Our initial observations of the painting and the exploration of their interpretations do not give us a clear picture of what givenness might mean. That is also not what is needed, however. Rather, we need room to explore different possible meanings. The disagreement between the interpreters is a clear sign this room is there.

Before we can explore this room further, we need to examine the conception of the 'holy' or 'divine' that is now introduced. We introduced Rembrandt's expression of holiness in the everyday scene with the frame and curtain to our discussion of divine law as implied in the family tie in relation to *Antigone*. Are these not, however, very different conceptions of how holy and ordinary touch on one another and therefore also of possible views of givenness? In *Antigone*, 'divine' is an abstract qualification of a self-evident but unnameable duty and law. In Rembrandt, it comes to refer to a specific Christian topos, albeit here depicted as an everyday family. In *Antigone*, family relations are of such a kind that they might arouse piety. They might have a specific moral weight in that they are the setting in which duties are experienced as divine. In the case of Rembrandt's

paintings, such a moral weight is not in the foreground. Family is presented, however, as a setting with overtones of the sacred and in that sense not entirely different from what we discovered in *Antigone*. Moreover, the fact that, for Rembrandt, an ordinary, domestic family scene can serve as a representation of the holy, of the life of Jesus as the Son of God, does give rise to ethical questions. It makes one wonder what this means for the moral status of family life. Does family life as such evoke the holy, make one aware of or enable one to 'catch a glimpse of the meaning of the sacred bond which it is man's lot to form with life'? (*Homo Viator*, 82). What could this sacred or holy character of the bond mean? In both *Antigone* and Rembrandt's painting, it is something sacred that can be revealed in the most common everydayness. In the case of *Antigone*, however, the call implied in the ordinary or common family tie is revealed in the extreme situation of sacrificing one's life. In the case of Rembrandt's painting, we are far from such extremes: here is a sober depiction of a seemingly trivial moment, a mother and her infant in an intimate domestic setting. In the case of Rembrandt, can it be articulated at all what sacredness in the everyday might mean? Does the painting hint towards more elaborate meanings? Again, these questions touch on our approach to family as mystery.

Viewing the two artistic expressions side by side also gives rise to another reflection on the problems, even dangers, inherent in the ascription of such a special, even holy, status to such an ordinary scene. In Chapter 2, we discussed the problems of presenting family as a distinct sphere that somehow precedes the political one of human agreements and arrangements. Such a view would confer on family an aura of givenness as immutable and enshrined in absolute 'laws'. Thus, it becomes a sphere that somehow precedes cultural or political deliberation and flexibility. Similar problems seem to arise at any suggestion of holiness with respect to family. The artistic tradition of picturing the Holy Family then seems to be potentially problematic. Do not all Holy Family images somehow express a glorification of family life and thus serve some form of family ideology or at least an idealisation? Or is this too simple, direct and moralistic an interpretation? Could these images enable one to track a different kind of expression of the holy character with a different kind of moral implication? These overlapping questions already lead us into a further exploration of the artistic topos of the Holy Family as such. Such an exploration seems an apt next step after these first evocations of givenness via Rembrandt's realistic paintings.

*The Ambiguity of the Artistic Genre of the Holy Family*

The iconography of the Holy Family that shows Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus in an intimate, often tender family portrait may seem to be an authentic object of Christian devotion. In fact, however, it is a late theme in Western Christian iconography and as such, a remarkable development. Building on the representations of the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Flight into Egypt that were popular in the Middle Ages, it became an independent scene that flourished only from the Renaissance onwards. The Counter-Reformation in particular played an important role in the rise in popularity of the Holy Family as a theme in art.<sup>11</sup> The modern period, especially the nineteenth century, is consequently known for its strongly idealised genre paintings of the Holy Family. Small works of this kind became very popular. Because of their largely instrumental function as well as promoting a certain family ideology, they are not highly esteemed as works of art. The Holy Family was visualised as a moral example in a time when family life was thought to be threatened. This is also apparent from the numerous societies that have arisen with the Holy Family as their patron saint and in the founding of the Roman Catholic Feast of the Holy Family (1893 and 1921).<sup>12</sup>

If one looks at the place of the Holy Family in the Bible, the popularity of the topos is anything but obvious. The three do not figure as a nuclear family at the heart of the Gospel stories. They are present as a family in the Nativity and early childhood scenes, but these stories are marginal in comparison to the Gospels as a whole. From the start, they are a rather deviant family, with Mary pregnant not by Joseph, but through the Holy Spirit, and Jesus the son of God the Father and not of Joseph. The New Testament refers to Jesus' brothers and sisters, but it is precisely in relation to them and also in relation to his mother, Mary, that Jesus displays a rather hostile attitude. They are explicitly opposed to his followers, whom he calls his brothers and sisters, thus placing them above his natural family.<sup>13</sup> Hatred of or breaking with one's family is even called a condition

<sup>11</sup> Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'Art Chrétien*, Vol. II/2 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957), 149; Sachs, 'Familie, Heilige', 4–6; Adolf, 'Heilige Familie', 1277; Klemens Richter, 'Familie, heilige', in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vol. 3, ed. by Hans D. Betz, Don S. Browning, Bernd Janowski and Eberhard Jüngel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 25; Hildegard Erlemann, *Die Heilige Familie. Ein Tugendvorbild der Gegenreformation im Wandel der Zeit. Kult und Ideologie*, Schriftenreihe zur religiösen Kultur, Vol. 1 (Münster: Ardey-Verlag, 1993), especially chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>12</sup> Adolf, 'Heilige Familie', 1277; Richter, 'Familie', 25; Erlemann, *Die Heilige Familie*, for example, 15, 19, 167ff.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 3:34–35, Matt. 12:48–50, Luke 8:21.

of following Jesus.<sup>14</sup> It is not difficult to observe in the post-biblical developments of Christendom a counter-familial tendency ranging from the desert ascetics of early Christianity to the institution of celibacy for the clergy and the flourishing of monasticism. How, then, did this representation of the Holy Family become so popular? Is this late occurrence not another sign of its ideological character? Given the biblical traditions and later developments, the idea that 'family values' are part of a Christian view of the good life is far from obvious.

In his book *Die Heilige Familie und ihre Folgen*, Albrecht Koschorke (2000) argues that the depiction of the Holy Family as an 'intimate community, full of tender turning towards the other' has a 'decisive share in the . . . presence of an ideal of family intimacy in everyday life' in the Western world to the present day.<sup>15</sup> However, he also points out the remarkable character of this great influence, given the tendency towards hostility to family in the Gospels. Koschorke emphasises the apparently anomalous character of the Holy Family as a family with, for example, three paternal figures of both human (Joseph) and divine (God and Holy Spirit) character.<sup>16</sup> Koschorke does not explain the unexpected rise in the popularity of the Holy Family as a distinct topos in Christian art in terms of ideological programmes. He understands it as first of all a result of the creativity prompted by the central religious symbol of the incarnation as such. The incarnation as the union of the divine and the human is always characterised by restlessness (*Unruhe*). This union cannot be expressed, according to Koschorke, in definite concepts, but demands continuous reformulations. In a similar way, the Holy Family of the incarnate God contains an ambiguity: it creates an in-between space between the holy and the profane, between the divine and the human. This in-between character gives rise to a great variety in interpretations and appropriations (40–2).

This variety is visible in the tendencies towards a humanisation of God (*Vermenschlichung Gottes*), which range from the elevated representations of the late antiquity and Byzantine art to the corporality of Renaissance art. Koschorke describes this development as an increase in naturalness – that

<sup>14</sup> Luke 14:26; compare also Mark 10:29–30.

<sup>15</sup> Albrecht Koschorke, *Die Heilige Familie und ihre Folgen* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2000), 20; compare also 38; translations are mine.

<sup>16</sup> Koschorke, *Die Heilige Familie*, 40. As a result of the competition between these paternal figures, Koschorke argues, the position of the father has never been taken up in a univocal way in Christianity – which seems rather amazing for a patriarchal religion. Nevertheless, the image of this Holy Family has been very influential in shaping the social codes of the Western world. Koschorke even relates this ambiguity of the father position to the suggested current crisis of fatherhood, which stands over against a rather stable relation between mother and child (216).

is, conformity to the human world.<sup>17</sup> It is paralleled by an understanding of Mary's motherhood as this-worldly (*Verdiessseitigung*). The latter view is part of the mediaeval turn to the figure of Mary as such and to a more emotional piety centred around the dramatic perception of Jesus' passion and death (45). In this context, new expressions of the relationship between Mary and Jesus arise such as the Mater dolorosa, the Stabat Mater and the Pieta (45–50). According to Koschorke, the biblical and theological basis for this kind of piety is very small. He characterises the motive of the 'grieving of the mother' as not genuinely Christian but rather stemming from 'pagan religiosity' (45). All these aspects of humanisation and this-worldliness are proof of an overcoming of the Christian tendency of hostility towards family. This hostility is, as we have just indicated, clearly present in the Gospels, but Koschorke points out that the opposite development is also depicted in the Gospels. Jesus started out as a rebel who freed himself from his family, his mother in particular, so that he could fulfil his heavenly duties. At the end of his life, however, only his mother and some other women stayed with him to mourn over him. His disciples, his new brothers and sisters, left him (45). The tradition of the Pieta from the fourteenth century onwards is in line with this failure to break free of the family, Koschorke argues. It does not show Christ the Redeemer or the rebel Jesus who challenges the order of the family. It highlights an attitude of resigned suffering and sacrifice in which the viewer may participate through identification with Mary's sorrows (48, 70).

Described in this brief way, this history of the rise of the artistic genre or topos of the Holy Family easily creates the impression of a story of the gradual domestication of the holy. That which in the figure of Jesus is potentially disturbing or even revolutionary for the given structures of society is lost in the course of time. In its institutionalisation and intertwinement with the powers that be, religion loses its controversial and transformative character, its sharp edges. The appreciation of ordinary family life that becomes visible in the rise of devotion to the Holy Family may then be seen as part of this domesticating development. It results in a religious life that is more likely to sanctify the status quo and thus becomes less complex and varied. This interpretation is not where Koschorke's argument leads, however. He emphasises that the Holy Family is not simply the existing family; it contains too many conflicting

<sup>17</sup> 'Gegründet auf das Dogma der Inkarnation, . . . erscheint das Übernatürliche im Verhältnis zwischen Christus und der Madonna in einem immer natürlicheren, der Menschenwelt gemässeren Licht' (Koschorke, *Die Heilige Familie*, 43).



meanings that resist such domestication. Each of the three persons of the Holy Family is a 'non-standard' family member: the mother, the father and the son. Koschorke's book is partly ordered as explorations of the different combinatory forms (*Kombinatoriken*) that arise from the variety of roles and positions of the three persons and the relationships between them. For example, the divine origin of the human being Jesus is itself threefold in the form of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which means a kind of doubling of the Holy Family. Mary is a mother, but also a virgin and the divine bride who embodies the church. The range of meanings of the different persons is broad and increases exponentially in the relationships between them. As a result, the 'field of gravitation' of the Holy Family is one in which, according to Koschorke, all differences laid down in cultural kinship systems 'break apart' (73). Koschorke calls this phenomenon *Entdifferenzierung*, 'undifferentiation'. The usual differentiations of the nomenclature of kinship collapse: all kinds of relationships are possible, including those forbidden in profane life. This is not a problem for the believer, however, but is 'met with joy'. What is usually irreconcilable is now suddenly compatible and speech is intoxicated by these possibilities of new combinations.

Koschorke wonders how this unlimiting (*entgrenzend*) character relates to that of the Holy Family as a moral model which displays certain norms (78). He concludes that the two tendencies characterise the 'Janus-faced disposition' of religious symbols as such. On the one hand, religion is unlimiting: it transcends the existing norms, logics and identities and promises freedom. On the other hand, however, it also gives rise to inclusions and exclusions. It inaugurates differences and similarities and thus a new order (79). Thus, the Holy Family imagery on the one hand collects elements from ordinary family life but combines them in ways unthought and un-experienced. It prompts creativity by which new meanings come into existence. These have been very influential in shaping the social codes and moral ideals of the Western world.

### *Givenness beyond Glorification of the Ordinary or Domestication of the Sacred*

We turned to the history of the artistic topos of the Holy Family in search of a deeper understanding and wider elaboration of Rembrandt's expression of the sacred in a realistic, everyday family scene. We associated Rembrandt's Kassel Holy Family with the topic of givenness first of all because life as given in its everyday character is taken seriously as suggesting something more, as revealing something beyond it, as expressing a surplus

of meaning. A closer look, especially at the presence of the painted frame and curtain, complicated this first association: the everyday scene as such is not enough to evoke the surplus of meaning. Moreover, the moral implications of the painting are unclear. These can range from a glorification of family life as good as such to a provocative profanation by a domestication of the holy. The morally problematic character of the first extreme is obvious, while the second leaves no room for transcendence. Is this problem not inherent in the topos as such of the Holy Family? These interpretive questions instigated an examination of its artistic history. The relatively late occurrence of this theme in art and its incongruity with the Gospels' tendency of hostility to family and with the non-standard Holy Family in the Gospels deepen the difficulties of relating the ordinary and the divine with an eye to morality. Koschorke's view of the topos of the Holy Family, however, leads beyond a simple interpretation of such relating as either glorification or domestication. Religious symbols like this give meaning by both 'unlimiting' existing distinctions and limiting or ordering life. They direct our attention to an aspect of reality by tilting it in unexpected ways. Thus, according to Koschorke, the image of the Holy Family has resulted in special attention to family life and an emphasis on its crucial role in the good life as well as a critique of it.

Koschorke's interpretation thus stimulates us to go beyond the options of viewing the Holy Family as either a glorification of the ordinary or a domestication of the sacred. The topos of the Holy Family as it developed in art did not simply imply a focus on family life as a good nor a doing away with the non-conventional views of family life in the New Testament. Koschorke observes in the symbol a kind of balancing between taking existing structures seriously and creatively opening up new meanings and therefore also criticising existing ones. This 'taking seriously' need not imply that family as such becomes good or sacrosanct. The balancing resonates with Marcel's view of family as mystery. This view takes family in its contingent, historical form seriously as a setting in which life is experienced in a deeper sense. That, however, is not to be equated with the sanctioning of the contingent or dominant forms of family life as good. Family as mystery means that people experience themselves here not merely as living beings, but as spirit – that is, as able to adopt an attitude towards life. Marcel characterises this attitude with terms like 'reverence', 'respect' and 'piety' towards life as a gift. How can we elaborate on this attitude in relation to the given character of family and its moral status? We noticed at the start of our investigation that family is difficult and controversial in ethics because its non-chosen character is not easily compatible

with our views of human moral actors as free, independent or autonomous. We conceived of family as confronting us with the non-chosen side of life, which stimulated an ethical reflection that holds together the moments of freedom and its 'other side', as we called it in Chapter 2. Rembrandt's Holy Family paintings and Koschorke's view of the Holy Family topos put us on the track of a balanced way of approaching the given character of family which takes seriously experiences of givenness without letting them ossify in the sanctioning of family life as good.

After these first evocations of the theme of family and givenness from Rembrandt, we now turn again to academic debates in which this theme is prominent, in both a constructive and a critical sense. Despite the critical questions raised, the idea that life as it presents itself shows that family is important is all but exceptional in ordinary thinking. A very common way of characterising family is to call it a natural, biological or genetic relationship. It is in this suggested naturalness that its difference from other kinds of relationships lies. The language of naturalness is found in recent family ethics as well. In general, ethicists seldom speak naively of naturalness because of its suggestion of an absolute normativity of what are in fact only contingent, cultural facts. We will turn to two recent examples of family ethics that nevertheless strike a blow for this view of family as natural. To continue our reflection on the feeling for the sacred in experiencing givenness, we will take into account both a consciously non-religious and a religious example: the philosopher Brenda Almond and the theologian Don Browning.<sup>18</sup> As became clear in Chapter 1, Browning is a prominent researcher in recent theological and ethical reflections on family. Almond is one of the very few philosophers who addresses the topic of family in general and does not limit it to rights and duties in relations between parents and children. We will investigate their views in detail to explore what their seemingly risky language of the natural might reveal regarding speaking meaningfully about givenness. Moreover, since these are recent views, they enable us to explore the suggested problematic status of givenness in our time that we discussed in Chapter 1. As these views are clearly motivated by concern about the well-being of the family, they also give us the opportunity to continue our analysis of the worrisome status of the topic of family in contemporary research. The sensitivity to the risks of

<sup>18</sup> For an analysis of Almond and Browning in a different framework, see my article 'Dignity in the Family? Analyzing Our Ambiguous Relationship to the Family and Theological Suggestions toward Overcoming It', in *Fragile Dignity: Intercontextual Conversations on Scriptures, Family, and Violence*, Semeia Studies/Society of Biblical Literature, Vol. 72, ed. by L. Juliana Claassens and Klaas Spronk (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 169–88.

givenness and a first impression of an alternative understanding that we have acquired in our explorations of the theme of the Holy Family will be in our minds as we analyse these debates. We will return to Rembrandt in the conclusion to this chapter.

### **Givenness as Natural: Almond and Browning**

Brenda Almond's interest in the natural character of family clearly stems from worries regarding the current state of the family. In her 2006 study of the family, Almond analyses the current state as one of fragmentation leading to a decrease of its significance with negative effects for all.<sup>19</sup> To counter this trend, a revaluation of the natural character of family is needed. By family, Almond means 'the chain of personal connections that gives meaning to our human notions of past, present and future – a mysterious genetic entity that binds us in our short span of individual existence to our ancestors and to our successors' (*The Fragmenting Family*, 1). Fragmentation then signifies the decrease in importance of these relationships that determine our view of ourselves as beings with a specific past and a connection to the future. The importance of the 'mysterious genetic bond' is no longer self-evident. Almond acknowledges that this development is not easy to understand. The qualification 'mysterious' indicates that there is not simply a 'genetic bond' at stake. The complexity of the issue is further reflected in her investigation of three, mutually reinforcing fields in which the fragmentation becomes visible.

*Brenda Almond: The Fragmentation of the Family Explained by the Decline of Respect for the Natural*

Almond starts her analysis with an extensive exploration of her own field of expertise, that of philosophical reflection and intellectual deliberation in general. Here she observes both a silence and a 'hatred for the family' (204), holding influences stemming from feminism, Marxism and deconstructionism particularly responsible for the latter. Briefly summarised, these ways of thinking view family as a vehicle of inequality. A second field that shows the fragmentation of the family is science and technology. Artificial reproductive technology creates a new kind of family relations. This is often presented as only serving the needs of families by enabling non-genetic parenthood. Almond challenges this account as one-sided (120). In

<sup>19</sup> Brenda Almond, *The Fragmenting Family* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006).

her view, the conscious choice to create new life in a context of non-genetic relationships blurs the status of bonds between the child and its genitors. The importance, however, of these genetic bonds does not disappear all of a sudden now that it is possible to become pregnant with a non-genetically related child. The idea that children have a right to know their genetic ancestors is not far-fetched, according to Almond. A third field of the disintegration of the family is that of law and policymaking, which of course reflects the aforementioned developments. Almond speaks of a 'legal deconstruction of the family' (2) that is taking place. In law and policy, marriage is no longer privileged and family is defined in a functional or a sociolegal way instead of biologically. It has become easier to divorce. Almond cites plans for equalling any kind of close or intimate relationship to the legal status of family relations.<sup>20</sup> Such proposals are in keeping with the reality of non-genetic and newly composed families after divorce. Law has clearly incorporated the idea that relationships are less permanent and that people beyond the circle of genetic kin may claim family status.

Almond unfolds her critique of the fragmentation of the family in these three fields by first describing examples of it in a variety of societal and especially legal developments. Returning observations are that family relations vary across one's lifetime and are thus less permanent and stable. Of course, this lack of permanence is most prominent in couple relationships, but this affects all other family relations. The ideal of 'sexual exclusivity or faithfulness' (23) wanes with the decrease in viewing marriage as a permanent alliance. In her evaluation of these developments, Almond recognises the attraction of the alternative idea of freedom, choice and variety, but doubts whether people can live with such unclear and unstable situations which find their most extreme expression in open marriage (27–30). Central to the underpinning of her criticism are the consequences of this free choice for the most vulnerable family members, children.<sup>21</sup> They cannot choose for themselves but have to succumb to the whims of the adults. It is very difficult to give voice to and serve children's interests when parents disagree on their role and rights (127–40). Almond points out that the claim to serve their interests is easier made than proved.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from mapping out these factual changes in stability and reflecting on them critically, Almond also goes into the moral justifications that, in

<sup>20</sup> Almond (*The Fragmenting Family*, 2, 202) refers to the 2001 Canadian report of the Law Commission of Canada, *Beyond Conjugalit*.

<sup>21</sup> Almond, *The Fragmenting Family*, chapter 7, pages 17, 55, 68, 101.

<sup>22</sup> Almond cites empirical research that has shown that if no abuse or violence is present, quarrelling parents are less of a problem for children than divorce (Almond, *The Fragmenting Family*, 143–4).

her view, sustain them. A central sentiment in these justifications is a concern for equality and against discrimination. This sentiment leads to downplaying biological ties and advocating more room within the sphere of the family for people who were not traditionally part of it. This is a concern for equality not just between men and women, but also between heterosexual and homosexual and other relationships, married and unmarried couples, with or without children, as well as people who are single and want to have children. According to Almond, taking same-sex families into account has been particularly of great influence on this equality thinking and the new laws and policies based on it. She analyses it as an 'ambitious attempt to rewrite the concept of the family in its entirety' (166–7). Her brief summary of the difference between this new conception and the earlier ways of defining family is a lack of respect for the natural character of the family.

*The Importance of the Natural and the Vagueness of Its Underpinning*

Almond's use of this terminology of the natural is not very precisely defined, although it is the central thread in her critical analyses of the different fields. She opens her first chapter with a section entitled 'What Is Natural?' (11–15) and ends the book with one called 'The Attack on Biology: Diminishing the Blood Tie'. She uses the terms 'biological' and 'genetic' as synonyms for 'natural' and sometimes refers to the 'blood tie'. If one tries to get a more systematic picture of the use of this terminology throughout the book, the most obvious meaning is related to reproduction: the fact that new life comes into existence not from one human being alone but only through the joint action of a man and a woman. In that sense we may interpret her views of family as focussing on givenness, although this is not her terminology. She uses the terms 'biological' or 'natural' first and foremost in reference to this basis of family in reproduction (15). Pair bonding is also explicitly referred to as a 'natural phenomenon', which, Almond adds, is also present in other species (40).

Almond regards these biological facts as the original basis on which kinship took shape in culture. It is the basis first of all for the high cultural status ascribed to 'the physical connection of two persons of opposite sex'. In many cultures, this was institutionalised in marriage as the context for bearing and raising children (15). The commonality of marriage throughout history and in different cultures, and blood relationship as 'the webbing underpinning most-known cultures and societies' (96), are historical facts that Almond often quotes as confirming the guiding character of the natural.



She also relates this central importance of the offspring-generating bond between man and woman to the idea that natural, innate aspirations are different for men and women. Over against feminist arguments in favour of a genderless family, she states that the natural inclinations of women to let the personal prevail over the political must be acknowledged.<sup>23</sup> It is not just in feminist circles that this guidance of the natural is lost, but much more broadly as well. The unity of sex, permanence in relationships and child raising, and their support by economic and legal structures (12) no longer exists. Sex is not necessary to generate offspring and is valued as such. People stay together as long as their relationship works. Moreover, new reproductive technologies have created other, artificial ways of having children. Almond, however, denies that it is possible to simply leave the importance of these biological facts behind and redefine family in a broader and less precise way. What has been the meaningful ground of a special relatedness for centuries – that is, that sex naturally implies the possibility of progeny and that both should take shape in a network of stable relationships – cannot simply be ignored. Science, in her view, also confirms the importance of the natural through the rise in knowledge of our genetic makeup (95–7). It underlines that kinship cannot be narrowed to the parent–child relationship, but implies a much wider network of connections.

That it is not problematic to favour this genetic network above other relationships and regard it as implying greater obligations is something Almond discusses in the final chapters. She introduces the issue of the ethical justification of the ‘preference for your “own”’ or ‘partiality’ (181). From an equality perspective, this idea is, of course, suspect due to its apparent egotistical or discriminating character. Almond suggests, however, that the family may show a third possibility (184) between the extremes of individualism and egalitarianism. To begin with, a preference for family members would not in principle rule out also ‘putting out a hand to help a stranger’ (185). More important is that, when applied to family, the partiality argument is paradoxical: the idea of favouring the particular group of the family would count for everyone and thus be a ‘universal duty’ (182). The difficulty lies in how to coexist in such a way that this is indeed possible for everyone (186). For this purpose, it is necessary to find and occupy ‘some moral ground between concern for all and concern for oneself’, and it is precisely in this in-between sphere that Almond locates family. She regards the given – that is, biological or

<sup>23</sup> Almond, *The Fragmenting Family*, 76–7, where she briefly refers to evolutionary psychology and also to Carol Gilligan’s analyses.

natural – character of family as of central importance for this ‘distinctive ethical status’ (186). Precisely because of its natural givenness, family may, moreover, be an institution that cuts ‘across political, economic and social hierarchies’ (66). Thus, it remains ‘the ultimate bulwark against depersonalized totalitarian regimes’. Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that families can themselves be repressive.

As Almond gives little systematic account of what kind of terminology the language of the natural is and its current status, her few statements on it stand out quite strikingly. The first is a conclusion halfway through her book, at the end of the fifth chapter, on the consequences of new technology for having or not having children (reliable methods of contraception, safe abortion and in vitro fertilisation (IVF)). She states: ‘The reasons for the importance given to the genetic link are complex, and may perhaps better be sought within the depths of the subconscious mind rather than in any reasoned judgement’ (97). Remarkably, she characterises here the importance of a given, a scientific fact (‘genetic link’), as one that cannot so much be rationally argued for but is rooted in the subconscious. As examples, she refers to the myths of the changeling and of Cinderella. Finally, she mentions the age-old ‘doubts about paternity’ that are at present augmented due to egg and embryo donation, which also lead to the possibility of unexpectedly being siblings. All this is the result of the fact that ‘previously unified roles are now susceptible to division’. For Almond, the ‘subconscious’ or irrational character clearly does not mean that these feelings and experiences should not be taken seriously. The wish ‘to know and to belong’ is part of how at least some people form their identities and should therefore be taken into account in policy concerning donation and adoption (96).

Her chapter 6 concludes with a similar statement. In this chapter, Almond focusses entirely on these new reproductive technologies and their moral underpinning by reference to ‘rights to reproduce’ (99). In this context, she emphasises the rights of children that are easily lost to view. After discussing the questions of whether and how mothers and fathers matter with respect to raising children and the possible problems related to not knowing one’s genetic parents, she concludes the chapter by emphasising once more the difficulty of the matter at hand. She qualifies this complexity by suggesting that it is not clear that these issues ‘are open to the kind of reasoning that is standard in either science or the social sciences’ (119) – science being the field she discusses in these two chapters. She continues: ‘Perhaps indeed it will have to be accepted that argument cannot settle these matters, which are deeply intuitive. They bring into

question conceptions of family, social and legal conventions, and a judgment about the value of nature versus human artifice.' Subsequently, she again refers to people's interest in their genetic kin, their choice in assisted reproductive technology (ART) procedures for having genetically related children, and most people's favouring of 'security and reliable family relationships'. These examples support the importance of genetic relatedness that was until recently constitutive of family life.

These two brief meta-remarks thus combine two approaches and recall Almond's opening definition of the family as a 'mysterious genetic entity' that binds one to ancestors and successors. On the one hand, she regards family as founded on the given of natural facts, the understanding of which is deepened in modern times by science. On the other hand, she states that family is a mystery rooted in the 'subconscious' and 'deeply intuitive', which makes it a complex reality whose meaning and value cannot be determined easily by means of common, rational argument. The latter qualifications resonate with our attention to the difficulty of naming what family might mean. In particular, she highlights the importance of the genetic link as difficult to account for in rational arguments. Almond is thus not unaware of this unnameability of what family might mean and displays a sense of mystery. This awareness, however, is not in keeping with her use of the terminology of the natural with its strong connotations of factuality and science. Thus, a tension arises which may again be interpreted as a moment of a meaningful impasse. The two word fields of mysteriousness and naturalness are apparently both needed to indicate the specific character of family, but they are incongruent.

What is more, Almond does not notice any tension between calling family a 'mystery' and at the same time 'natural'. Perhaps this is because the language of the natural predominates in her reasoning and along with it the connotations of factuality and realism. On the other hand, right at the beginning of her book, she already signals that biology cannot be claimed as the 'ethical foundation of the family' (9). Almond indicates this with the classic phrase that it is problematic to reason 'from what *is* to what ought to be' (14). Instead, she argues that she uses the biological observations in a more modest way, only as the 'most plausible' or 'reasonable' starting point (9) for understanding family. The 'facts of nature' indicate what 'human life at its best could be' and thus guide judgement about what is good (14). Nevertheless, she indeed speaks of *facts* in this context and qualifies them further by opposing them to 'doctrinal teaching or authority'. The latter is, in her view, not necessary to give the natural its moral weight. For this way of dealing with nature as the reasonable starting point

of understanding family, Almond claims the label of the philosophical tradition of 'natural-law' thinking (13–15). This does not result, however, in a continuous discussion of this tradition in her book. While she acknowledges that the natural-law tradition has been largely elaborated in a religious framework, she herself wants to interpret it 'in a way that avoids the need to appeal to religious doctrines that can be accepted as a guide only by adherents' (15) and often 'brings contention' (207). Almond describes the non-religious and therefore 'wider appeal' of the natural-law tradition she aims for as 'an understanding of sexual morality that is based on serious reflection about what is most fulfilling for human beings at successive ages and stages of life, taking into account their emotional needs and lifetime goals' (15).

This aim of 'serious reflection' on the specific needs during the human life course, again, does not sound like acknowledging the 'subconscious', 'intuition' or family as mystery, but as realistic and fact-based. However, the actual character of her book is not a meticulous analysis of different life stages and their implications for how family must be understood, just like it is not a detailed natural-law argument in favour of family. Almond's style and analyses are essayistic rather than sharp, analytic or knock-down arguments. Thus, using quasi-factual terminology, Almond tries to express and support something which she also characterises as a mystery with which reason cannot easily come to grips. She does not account for her choice for the language of the natural or ponder its possibly problematic sides. She uses it as if it were obvious.<sup>24</sup> This suggested obviousness seems to rest on the aura of factuality, realism and scientificity of the language of the natural. Her use also shows that it is indeed an 'aura': the language of the natural as she uses it is not precise or scientific in the sense of well-defined, obvious or based on verifiable facts. This language of the natural is thus Almond's way of speaking about aspects of reality that should be taken into account as given. It refers to something obvious that is rooted in how things go in nature in general, but this claim is not proven.

### *Problems of the Language of the Natural as Claiming Obviousness*

Our reflections on the Holy Family and Rembrandt's realistic depiction of it confronted us with the dangers of a strong notion of the givenness of family. They relate to the more general risks of presenting family as an

<sup>24</sup> Compare Almond, *The Fragmenting Family*, 9: 'For many people, the most plausible starting point for any analysis [of family] is biological.'

unalterable sphere that precedes choice and human arrangement. What are in fact contingent forms are presented as given normative structures. Thus, dominant forms of life are easily endorsed while minority forms are excluded. Almond clearly regards the intact heterosexual family with its biological offspring as normative. In her argument, this does not imply, however, a condemnation of all other forms of family life. She acknowledges that the emancipation of women and new forms of family life have resulted in a lot of good. She also argues that the coming into existence of a more diverse family life does not mean that the more traditional forms are no longer of value. She tries to evoke the ethical weight of these traditional forms by pointing out their 'natural' character. Although Almond does not end up taking a straightforwardly conservative approach, her language can be easily misused to deny certain groups the label of family and its corresponding rights. It is, for example, quite common to condemn homosexual relations as 'unnatural', implying that these are not true relationships equal to that between a man and a woman.

This is not, however, where the central difficulty of this approach lies. A greater problem is that this way of calling family natural or based on biological facts – that is, on reproduction and genetic relatedness – turns out to be language that ends rather than gives rise to thought and moral reflection in particular. It is a way of speaking that does not seem to need further clarification. Referring to what is natural turns out to be a claim of obviousness. Also, the importance of what is given 'by nature' does not seem to need justification. Thus, this language does not invite further reflection on what the natural character of relationships implies and what is so special or worthy of protection in this. The importance of the natural is presupposed, but is not argued for separately. Why precisely is the 'natural fact' of having sex with its implied possibility of procreation so important for a relationship? Why permanence? Moreover, the explanatory force of analysing our time and changing family life in terms of a decreasing respect for naturalness can be questioned. Family relationships are becoming less stable and more diverse. Why is this the case? Is this a sign that people no longer take 'nature' seriously? Where does this longing to free oneself from nature come from? This question arises especially when, paradoxically, the quality of naturalness also has a high status because of its aura of factuality and scientificity or, as in the sphere of reproduction technology, other, more sentient suggestions. The fact that these kinds of questions are not dealt with in Almond's book can be explained as the result of the aura of facticity and obviousness of the language of the natural: it does not seem to need any explanation.

In the overview of recent family research in Chapter 1, we noticed that its focus is not primarily the question of what family might mean. It rather tends to presuppose certain meanings as obvious and subsequently also self-evidently starts from a positive or negative evaluation of them. What family means is supposed to be clear both for advocates and opponents. Almond is clearly an advocate of family as a good, but that does not lead to explorations of this meaning and the good. The dominant characterisation of family as natural contributes to the impression of obviousness. One need only think of nature to understand what a family is and why it is important. Any further underpinning is unnecessary. In Almond, we observe as well that this is part of an approach that consists primarily in taking a position on current family developments – here a negative one. It does not give rise to further thought on how precisely permanent, non-chosen relationships can or should take shape at present, given their apparent lack of obviousness. Neither do the references to the natural create room to reflect on the ‘mysterious’ character of the family bond or its basis in the unconscious and in intuition, aspects Almond herself mentions. These aspects also ask that attention be paid to the given character of family. They imply questions rather than conclusions, however, and therefore do not match the language of the natural. Nonetheless, precisely because of this questioning character, they can stimulate moral reflection, also regarding the aspect of givenness. Almond draws particular attention to givenness in the sense of facts. Family should be acknowledged more as a fact of life. This approach does not aim to shed light on or make us aware of the moments in which this givenness can be concretely experienced and what its moral implications might be. The latter are narrowed down to a sticking to the so-called biological ties. If Almond had elaborated on the aspects of complexity and mysteriousness she mentioned, a different approach to family as given would have developed, one that would have stimulated moral reflection in exploring what this givenness might imply for our acting. This question is of course particularly burning in the case of problematic family situations. It is also important, however, to provide an alternative to a one-sided focus on equality which dominates in current views of family, according to Almond.

Almond explicitly renounces thinking in terms of religious natural law, without elaborating on her reasons. What happens when, contrary to Almond, this religious character is not excluded? Might a theological argument in favour of respecting the natural change the meanings of this naturalness? Could religious meanings be compatible with the scientific connotation of the language of the natural that is dominant in our time? Might a theological approach create room to take into account family as



mystery precisely as regards the aspect of givenness, because of its feeling for the sacred? With these additional questions, we will look at Don Browning as a recent example of a theological view of family as given.

*Don Browning: The Natural Character of Family as Shown in Science  
and Christian Belief*

Browning is famous for his various big interdisciplinary family studies projects from 1990 until his death in 2010, which brought together dozens of scholars and led to an enormous amount of publications.<sup>25</sup> Browning presents this practical theological research as originating in the quest for an 'alternative liberal and critical Christian theology of families to counter the dominant perspective proffered by the American religious right'. The project was soon reformulated more openly as describing and explaining the recent 'rapid changes' in family life and providing a Christian response to them (*Equality and the Family*, 38). The changes are the well-known developments we mentioned in Chapter 1, summed up as 'more divorce, more childbirth outside of marriage, more non-marriage, more cohabitation' (38). Browning's research is, like Almond's, a clear specimen of the worried branch of family research. The changes are identified as elements of which 'Christianity throughout its history has been skeptical' (39). In Browning, the worries are specified further by taking into account sociological analyses of modern time as one of the colonisation of the intimate world of the family and other smaller communities by that of the 'technical rationality of the systems world'.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Browning's studies gradually focussed on the

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of Browning's work and the central project 'Religion, Culture, and Family', see, for example, his articles 'Empirical Considerations in Religious Praxis and Reflection', in Don S. Browning, *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 31–49, and 'Introduction: the Equal-Regard Family in Context' (in *The Equal-Regard Family and Its Friendly Critics: Don Browning and the Practical Theological Ethics of the Family*, ed. by John Witte Jr., M. Christian Green and Amy Wheeler (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 1–16). The large overlap in Browning's texts makes the following references rather arbitrary. We do not cite more than three texts for a similar statement. To indicate that similar statements may also be found elsewhere, we use 'e.g.'. We will focus on the 2007 book *Equality and the Family* and the 2006 overview article 'World Family Trends' mentioned in note 27.

<sup>26</sup> *Equality and the Family*, 39–41. Browning speaks of the Weberian–Habermasian theory of colonisation and specifically refers to Robert Bellah as thinking through the thesis in relation to family. Compare also Browning, *Equality and the Family*, 84–100, 117, 247–9; Don S. Browning, *Marriage and Modernization: How Globalization Threatens Marriage and What to Do about It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 5–6, where he defines technical rationality as 'the belief that the efficient use of powerful technical means in the form of either business procedures or government bureaucracies can increase our individual and collective satisfaction'.

role of the church in dealing with the changes in family life, both internally and in her public expressions (41).

The public character of the research is greatly emphasised also in methodological accounts. It is related to its being radically practice-oriented, in line with what is called the ‘turn to “practical philosophy”’ (6), also in its dealing with (religious) tradition. Moreover, the public character parallels the aim to write for the ‘social and cultural person on the street’ rather than just for the academia (35). Finally, aiming for public research means being ‘critical’ in the sense of not solely depending on the confessional starting point. The research should ‘stand up in the give and take of public discourse’ and ‘give reasons that have broader public intelligibility’.<sup>27</sup> To this end, Browning combines what he regards as central elements from the Christian tradition and from recent scientific theories on family. In this combinatory project, the language of the ‘natural’ and ‘biological’ figures prominently, both in the theological views and in those taken from other academic disciplines.

Like Almond, Browning summarises recent changes in family life as a decline of the intact biological family.<sup>28</sup> Social scientific research has by now shown ‘definitively’, according to Browning, that being raised outside of biological two-parent families affects children’s chances negatively.<sup>29</sup> He specifies this by locating the heart of the problem in the decline of the involvement of the father in family life, which he labels ‘the male problematic’ (e.g., Browning, *Equality and the Family*, 115). Worldwide, women

<sup>27</sup> Don S. Browning, ‘World Family Trends’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. by Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 243–60, at 250–1 (apart from the sections on ‘political culture’, largely the same as ‘Practical Theology and the American Family Debate’ from 1997 (*Equality and the Family*, chapter 7, pages 103–30); the following references are to the 2006 article). Elsewhere (e.g., Browning, *Equality and the Family*, chapter 12, pages 254–7), Browning also uses the term ‘critical’ to indicate that his theory of ‘familism’ is critical of the current worrisome developments and proposes a marriage culture that favours the intact biological family guided by the critical principle of ‘equal regard’. Equal regard means, briefly, that all family members are respected as of equal value. They should all be enabled to develop themselves fully (405). Children should be educated to later build ‘equal regard’ relationships by themselves. All adults are seen as equally responsible for their family life. Moreover, family members should respect and support one another in caring for their relatives (Don S. Browning, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, Pamela D. Couture, K. Brynolf Lyon and Robert M. Franklin, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 303–4). Good, empathetic communication is crucial for this ‘equal regard’.

<sup>28</sup> Browning clarifies that ‘intact’ does not necessarily mean a focus on the nuclear family as an entity on its own, isolated from the extended family and other social networks (*Equality and the Family*, 351).

<sup>29</sup> Browning, ‘World Family Trends’, 244, which refers to Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1–12. See also Browning, *Equality and the Family*, 113.

and children are the victims of this tendency and, in the end, men themselves are as well. It leads to a global trend of the feminisation of poverty and kinship.<sup>30</sup> The central aim of Browning's research is therefore to contribute to the support of the intact biological family by stimulating the involvement of the father. To this end, he draws on results from different scientific disciplines which, in his view, reinforce each other. Depending on the context, Browning advances one or the other disciplinary approach to underpin his statements.

Apart from social scientific data that show the bad effects of disintegrated families, a very prominent place is assigned to proof from evolutionary sciences. It is here that the terminology of the 'natural' or 'biological' flourishes. It is used to indicate certain original tendencies of the human species, also in comparison to other mammals. Among the evolutionary theories, Browning prefers what he calls 'evolutionary psychology'. This is, in Browning's words, 'a relatively new discipline that uses the concepts of evolutionary theory to order the facts of human psychology'.<sup>31</sup> Browning prefers this among the evolutionary disciplines as it is the 'least deterministic' and 'the most open to understanding how cultural patterns influence our evolved biological tendencies'. This evolutionary view confirms 'why children of intact biological parents seem, on average, to do better' (*Equality and the Family*, 121) and helps in particular to come to grips with the male problematic. Browning first of all highlights the evolutionary views on the exceptionality of human family behaviour: 'Humans are one of the very few mammals in which males have become a relatively stable part of the nurturing of their children' ('World Family Trends', 251). Browning refers to W. D. Hamilton's theory of 'inclusive fitness' and 'kin altruism' from the 1960s and 1970s to better understand why both parents are so invested in the raising of their biological offspring, more than other people.<sup>32</sup> Browning summarises the relevant part of Hamilton's theory as that 'individuals are concerned not only with the survival of their own specific genes', but also with a broader group of family members, 'those who carry their genes' (252). The exceptional involvement of human males in the raising of their children is, according to Browning,

<sup>30</sup> Browning, *Equality and the Family*, passim, for example, chapter 3, especially 52–5.

<sup>31</sup> Browning, *Marriage and Modernization*, 106. See also 'World Family Trends', 251; *Equality and the Family*, 120–1. Browning uses evolutionary ecology as a synonym of evolutionary psychology (e.g., *Equality and the Family*, 157–61).

<sup>32</sup> For example, Browning, *Equality and the Family*, 73, 119–20, 137–8, 154–93, 205, 335; 'World Family Trends', 252. Browning's use of evolutionary thinking predates his big family projects; compare, for example, Don S. Browning and Bernie Lyon, 'Sociobiology and Ethical Reflection', *Theology Today* 36/2 (1979): 229–38.

furthermore better understood by taking into account Hamilton's inventory of conditions for this involvement ('World Family Trends', 252; *Equality and the Family*, 121). First is fatherly acknowledgement of a child as his own; second is the high investment needed to cover the relatively long period of human infant dependence; third is the fact that the parents continue their sexual contact after reproduction; and fourth is the 'reciprocal altruism' or 'mutual helpfulness' between the genitors.<sup>33</sup> These conditions contributed to the male integration into family life 'thousands of years ago' ('World Family Trends', 252).

Unlike Almond, Browning gives much more attention to the ethical status of these insights from evolutionary thinking. He usually categorises them with the social scientific data as showing 'pre-moral goods'. Such goods are as such not 'directly moral' (*Equality and the Family*, 401) and thus not enough to realise correct moral behaviour, but they do indicate a direction towards it. Therefore, a pre-moral good 'is not to be absolutised but held as an important relative good to be encouraged'.<sup>34</sup> The moral weight of what is given is thus first of all elaborated in terms of acknowledging the specific character of how family life developed in the course of the evolution.

Remarkably, however, taking into account this proof from evolutionary thinking as a pre-moral good is presented as compatible with a theological approach. It enables a 'reconstructing' of Catholic natural-law theory on family as well as of Protestant views of the 'orders of creation'.<sup>35</sup> In the case of natural-law theory, Browning undertakes this reconstruction by turning to the thirteenth-century family theory of Thomas Aquinas, which draws on many ideas of Aristotle.<sup>36</sup> According to Browning, Aquinas' thoughts are 'strangely close and yet quite far' from the insights found in

<sup>33</sup> In his references to the findings of evolutionary ecology, Browning highlights three related concepts from this evolutionary approach as relevant: inclusive fitness, kin altruism and parental investment (*Equality and the Family*, 157–61). The parental investment of males grew as human beings became hunter-gatherers: a 'dad-strategy' came into existence (159–60). The conditions for this transition are now limited to the three of long childhood dependence, paternal certainty about offspring and 'male helpfulness to a female in order to gain sex' (160).

<sup>34</sup> Browning, 'World Family Trends', 246. Pre-moral goods are one of the five dimensions of the 'thick morality' Browning identified in his earlier methodological work on practical theology and ethics. The other dimensions are narratives and metaphors, moral principles, sociological, economic and ecological views of action and specific practices related to roles and situations. This theory of the five dimensions of practical moral reason stems from Browning's *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1991, in particular 139–70). See also, for example, *Equality and the Family*, 29, 401–2.

<sup>35</sup> For example, Browning, *Equality and the Family*, 120, 125; 'World Family Trends', 255–7.

<sup>36</sup> Browning often quotes a passage from Aquinas on the necessity of the support of both parents to raise human children, which is different from other animals (*Summa Theologica*, q 41.a.1; for

evolutionary theory (*Equality and the Family*, 161). Browning illustrates this closeness by pointing out that Aquinas also acknowledged the problem of male involvement in the family and discussed it in relation to different involvement strategies among other animals. Like evolutionary thinkers, Aquinas realised the crucial issue of long childhood dependence among humans and noted the importance of paternal certainty about offspring for monogamous relations (162). Both contribute in his view to parental investment (164). Moreover, Aquinas regards sexuality as 'integrating marital partners' ('World Family Trends', 253). Thus, all four conditions discovered in present-day evolutionary thinking have their parallel in Aquinas. This elaboration of the 'naturalistic moment' (256) is, according to Browning, precisely what is needed to reconstruct a parallel notion in Protestant theology: that of God-given orders of creation which include family alongside state, church and labour. As this theory is often formulated in purely confessional terms and is thus only 'binding on the inner life of churches', it should be complemented to make it suitable for arguing in the 'public square' (255). In evolutionary theory and natural law, such additional reasons can be found.

Browning describes the methodological place of the insights into nature as follows: 'The naturalism recommended here is not a scientific one that wipes tradition away and builds an ethic on the basis of the accumulation of discrete natural facts. The naturalism advocated here uses insights gained from the relatively distantiated epistemology of the social and evolutionary sciences to add a dimension of realism to the attestations of faith' (256). The realism enables the aforementioned public speaking of religion. Browning emphasises, however, that the ethical religious view cannot be reduced to this naturalism or simply be erected on its basis. What, then, are the specific 'attestations of faith', apart from the aforementioned general Christian scepticism towards the fragmenting family and the theories of natural law and the divine orders of creation? Browning focusses on two aspects, which he relates primarily to Aquinas and the New Testament. First of all, Aquinas points out the sacramental character of marriage, by which he means that it is 'reinforced with the grace of God which flows from Christ's love for the church' (254). This love of Christ further specifies the general notion of divine grace infused through marriage. A passage from the New Testament letter to the Ephesians in particular forms the basis of this specification. In Ephesians 5:21–33, an

example, *Equality and the Family*, 162, 198), but he also refers to similar passages in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* (e.g., Browning, *Equality and the Family*, 163).

analogy is drawn between this love of Christ and that of the husband for his wife. The core element of this love is its self-sacrificial character: the husband must imitate Christ's love for the church in his commitment to his family and in sacrificing himself in his love for his family and his wife (e.g., *Equality and the Family*, 170, 184). Browning views this love as part of the 'equal regard' approach that characterises New Testament thinking. In comparison with the surrounding honour–shame culture, New Testament views of the roles of man and woman are in principle much more equal – although Browning states that this is 'not enough' for modern eyes (e.g., 181–6). Patriarchal elements are still present, also in Thomas, mainly from his Aristotelian inheritance. Nevertheless, the early Christian view really meant a revolution as regards the status of women. When embedded in the ideal of this broader New Testament norm of equal regard, self-sacrificial love also stays clear of becoming an end in itself – a danger which feminists in particular have pointed out (e.g., 187).

Browning also describes the methodological status of these specifically religious views in his family ethics. In his view, the function in general of religious symbols or narratives is that of 'stabilizing and deepening' natural inclinations and 'giving them a more permanent ethical form', which really means a 'transformation' ('World Family Trends', 254). Browning argues that biology 'informs' the meaning of the symbol, but does not 'dominate the final transformative work of the symbol and its surrounding narrative' (*Equality and the Family*, 195). What the sciences formulate on the basis of empirical evidence, religion and culture express in symbolic ways. Both approaches are necessary, according to Browning, as is clear from the fact that he describes both as reinforcing the other. This does not mean that he uncritically accepts all natural inclinations or all religious views. The criterion of 'equal regard' is presented as overruling. Browning claims it as biblical but also acknowledges modern influences in it. Moreover, the religious symbols are regarded as more 'mature' in comparison to the 'immature' natural inclinations (e.g., 201). If, in particular, men just follow their natural inclinations, this may lead them to a 'sexual strategy' away from their families. In this respect, the religious symbols do not just reinforce but also transform nature by favouring the commitment to family in permanent marriage and self-sacrificial love (172). Browning does not elaborate on the specifically religious character of this transformation, however. Instead, he often translates the religious views by common-sense statements like: 'no married relationship can survive over the long term without the husband and the wife possessing some capacity for self-sacrifice' (189).

*The Compatibility of Religious Insights with Scientific Facts*

The reason for our turning to Browning's language of the natural family was its religious character. Time and again, he states that the natural 'as such' cannot suffice as a basis for ethics. Browning aims for a distinctly theological contribution. Where does this become visible? He seems to start creating room for theological meanings by paying attention to the ethical status of the natural. In comparison to Almond, he pays more attention to this status. On the other hand, in the end, Browning's argument does not differ fundamentally from Almond's. He also argues on the basis of scientific views in favour of living in an intact family consisting of father, mother and their genetic offspring, although he focusses on the lack of involvement of the father in family life. Central in his view of family is thus that parents should stay together and men should do their share in family life in conformity with the principle of equal regard. Subsequently, the specific character of the religious view lies in the symbolic way of expressing these insights that Browning first of all takes from scientific views. They 'stabilize and deepen' them. The choice of precisely this view of the family as a good one is underpinned solely by proof that 'it works': the well-being of the family and thus of the husband, child and wife is served by this way of living. Empirical research is quoted as showing that, on average, families do better when they are kept intact, and evolutionary sciences are cited as pointing out that this shape of the family has the best chance of survival. The 'transformation' of the natural that the symbolic religious expressions of family are suggested to perform, especially in lasting marriage and self-sacrificial love, is not elaborated on with regard to its religious character. Browning's struggle to make theology more 'realistic' and 'practical' thus clearly dominates: his conclusions are put in general and common-sense, rather than emphatically religious, language. Attention to the difficulty of naming what family might mean, in particular in relation to a sacred dimension, or an awareness of its mystery character is absent. In Almond, we observed a tension between the language of the natural and the sparse remarks that display sensitivity to family as mystery. In Browning, a kind of tension can be seen between religious language of sacrament and self-sacrificial love on the one hand and naturalness on the other, but the dominance of the latter is even more emphatic. A real tension, let alone an impasse, does not arise.

Again, as in Almond, we can thus see how the language of the natural first of all invokes the authority of the sciences. In Browning, this authority is clearly visible in his project of making theology critical and public – that



is, comprehensible also to the 'person in the street'. To that end, the 'attestations of faith' need 'a dimension of realism'. This domination of the 'naturalist' and common-sense language need not surprise us: the aim of being 'realistic' seems entirely in conformity with the current high status of the fact- and evidence-based approaches we have already discovered in Almond. Nevertheless, it is surprising, given the provisos against a purely naturalistic ethics on which Browning also insists more explicitly than Almond. However, Browning does not elaborate on the precise consequences of such a naturalist ethics or on the dangers of thinking in terms of the natural. The framework of his debate is rather to find the right balance between scientific insights and those from religious sources. He aims to do justice to both. He regards taking the facts into account an improvement in theological views of family.

*The Robust Claim of Naturalness Does Not Give Rise to Moral Reflection on Givenness*

What do these two examples of using the language of the natural reveal as regards the possibilities of speaking meaningfully about givenness? In both examples, the language of the natural functions in three ways which sometimes overlap. The first becomes visible in the central claim that the intact two-parent family in which parents take care of their biological, non-adult offspring is the natural standard model of the nuclear family. Why this particular family form can be said to be natural is not shown, as we have seen. We only found references to the natural fact that a woman and a man are necessarily involved in creating offspring. Apart from that, Almond points to pair bonding as natural and Browning to the integration of fathers in caring for their offspring. The term 'natural', then, indicates that they see this feature in nature, among other animals who also have pair bonding, or as the outcome of a natural – that is, evolutionary – process of specifically human development. 'Natural' thus seems to mean first of all that something is an undeniable fact of the human makeup: without it human beings cannot survive. In a secondary sense, it is called 'natural' to regard one's biological parents as important, as constitutive of one's identity, even if parents and children have not lived together. The language of the natural thus allows these authors to assign a central place to reproduction and thus to biological relations in their reflection on what family might mean. Givenness is here expressed by pointing to facts laid bare by biology. This factual connotation does not facilitate a reflection on the moral question of why these facts should be so important in

determining the best form of family life. Such deliberation seems all the more necessary given the starting point of the reflections by Almond and Browning – that is, the observation that, at present, givenness in the sense of the natural is no longer respected. It remains unclear why they think they can nevertheless count on the power of the language of naturalness to express the morally binding character of the intact two-parent family.

Second, the language of the natural is self-evidently used as morally relevant. What is natural matters for determining what is good. Although the precise character of this relationship is a notoriously difficult question in ethics, these authors do not feel urged to account for it in a detailed way. We find references to natural-law theory in both. Browning even states he aims to reassess the importance of premodern natural-law thinking and the Protestant doctrine of the ‘orders of creation’. An elaborate philosophical or theological theory of the morally binding character of nature is not found in either of these authors, however. Instead, they step outside their own disciplines and argue in favour of the biologically related family by referring to empirical research. In particular, research is quoted that measures people’s well-being or psychological health, like in psychological investigations, including ones with an evolutionary perspective. They confirm that the so-called natural family model is most effective. As a result of these references to other disciplines, however, a different meaning of the natural comes into view in which effectiveness and efficiency become central. What is natural is what is proven to work best – that is, what provides the best chances of well-being for the greatest number of people. The natural is thus also good. This is a much more utilitarian model of arguing, while a natural law approach is more deontological. The authors themselves do not account for their views in terms of such a moral theory.

It is not surprising that this taking into account of the proven effects is preferred to a basis in absolute rules. This is in line with the orientation to ‘facts’ that can be perceived in general in Western societies, in particular in policy. However, calling the most effective model ‘natural’ does make a stronger claim than the rather modest claim that this model turns out to ‘work best’, given the current circumstances. Naturalness refers to ideas of a universal human makeup or design. This stronger claim should be accounted for. Otherwise, the claim is vulnerable to results from empirical studies that are opposed to it.<sup>37</sup> For example, what if evolutionary studies

<sup>37</sup> Compare our remarks on the role of social science data in ethical reflection on parenthood in Chapter 1.

show that children could be just as well raised in a larger group and have different 'parents' apart from their biological parents? This argument is commonly used in public debate to support the role of institutionalised day care. Or what if psychological research shows healthy relationships are constituted by lasting physical attraction between the partners instead of permanence based on their being the genitors of the same children? It would be hard to cope with such objections with the vague notion of the natural found in Almond and Browning. They use the term 'natural' as an expression of what works best and regard this as an important foundation of their view of what is good. Givenness thus acquires the meaning of what is scientifically proven to be the best possible family model. This turn to empirical sciences to underpin the natural confirms that, at least at present, this language does not stimulate moral reflection but leads away from it. Consequently, the crucial question of whether 'what works best' is also what is good does not arise.

A third way in which the language of the natural figures in Almond and Browning is in line with common parlance. The vagueness of the language as well as the lack of any accounting for its use are in line with how people usually speak of the natural. In that everyday language, 'natural' refers to things that are expected and obvious. Concluding that something is natural means that it simply is the case and no further explanation is necessary. This often implies a contrast to what is the object of human hopes or plans, or a result of human choices and acting.<sup>38</sup>

That the language of the natural highlights the obvious character of the family is not completely unrelated to what we have indicated from the start as the difficulty of naming what family might mean. Part of the latter is that usually it is not made explicit what family means; meanings are experienced as self-evident and give strong impulses for acting. People know what family means. It indeed needs no explanation. Claiming naturalness may be regarded as a way of expressing this obviousness. However, the analysis of Almond and Browning has revealed that calling something 'natural' gives a specific, robust connotation to acknowledging its self-evidence or obviousness: it suggests being factual, scientifically proven. This robustness does not correspond to the sensitivity to the difficulty of naming what family might mean. As such, it is the reverse of our approach to family as mystery. The terminology of the natural opposes critical questions or

<sup>38</sup> For example, one of the nine definitions of the *Collin's Cobuild Dictionary* says: 'Natural things exist or occur in nature and are not made or caused by people.' [www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/natural](http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/natural).

further inquiry by claiming to be 'nothing but factual'. The claim of being fact-based is, moreover, dominant in that it excludes the value of other arguments, as we saw in two moments of a kind of tension in their reasoning. The religious symbols were introduced as more than a deepening confirmation of the natural in Browning, but could not be elaborated because of his focus on their 'realistic' character. In Almond, we found unelaborated references to mystery, intuition and the unconscious. The lack of room for this mystery character goes with a lack of stimulating moral reflection. The focus of this research is on the problem of family decline, and the language of the natural is used to counteract this and achieve a new obviousness. The difficulty of making sense of the given side of life, especially in our time, is not explored. The language of the natural suggests that it is still self-evident to regard the family as given, if only one remembers how well this givenness works out in real life. Thus, the interpretation as 'natural' does not invite further explorations of what family might mean or discussion on the moral weight of its givenness. Its meaning and goodness are obvious. The kind of balancing approach to givenness that we traced in the paintings of the Holy Family is not found here. Although Almond and Browning are clearly critical of recent trends in family life, their understanding in terms of naturalness does not stimulate an awareness of the experiences of givenness and a creativity in dealing with it. For them, an intact family is the best way to live with givenness.

### **Recent Anthropology's View of Kinship as Made**

Almond and Browning perceive a widespread suspicion against family as something given. In their view, flexibility and lack of permanence threaten the existence and well-being of the family. We now step outside the context of the ethical debates to further explore this suggested tendency in a different discipline. In Chapter 1, we analysed sociological accounts of family decline and their historical critics. We briefly referred to similar critiques in social anthropology. The latter are particularly relevant to our theme of givenness because they are precisely opposite to the ones found in Almond and Browning. Recent kinship anthropologists argue against a view of Western family life as declining in modernity by pointing out that family has never been something natural or given. The so-called undeniable fact of reproduction is anything but the universal basis of kinship. Kinship is everywhere a cultural construct and therefore made, not given. An analysis of these anthropological views may therefore provide insight into what happens when the language of the natural is consciously

avoided in understanding family. Does this mean that attentiveness to what we have indicated as experiences of givenness is completely lost? If so, what does this imply for understanding what family might mean? Are meanings clearly defined as cultural constructs for each society? Or is our awareness of the difficulty of naming what family might mean, an awareness of the nature of family as mystery, also recognised in anthropological accounts? As emphatic opponents of the idea that family should be understood as a given, these anthropological views also enable us to gain a deeper insight into why givenness as embodied in family is so problematic for our time.

*The Turn from Nature and Givenness in Recent Kinship Anthropology*

In recent anthropological studies of kinship, it is hard to miss a complicated relationship to the understanding of family as given and, in particular, as natural or biological. Central to the self-understanding of the discipline is the narrative of a recent liberation from the old paradigms that regarded kinship as primarily given by nature. In line with the views of Almond and Browning, 'natural' or 'biological' here refers to the idea that, among human beings of all cultures, kinship relations are established first of all simply by procreation, by being born of two parents. Kinship relations are those between the child and its so-called biological genitors, and through them with a larger community connected by so-called blood ties. The language of the natural emphasises the givenness of family relations in the sense of being first of all an obvious, unalterable and universal fact of human life. The aim of anthropology in the old paradigm is presented as comparing the different ways cultures subsequently shape this primary givenness. Since the 1980s, however, this view has been criticised as the product of biased Western ways of thinking. Only Euro-Americans are said to understand themselves as defined first of all by their natural or biological makeup.

A recent survey article on the study of kinship entitled 'Transforming Kinship' by Sarah Franklin is illustrative of the prominence of the notion of a transformation in the view of kinship beyond biologicistic views.<sup>39</sup> Franklin speaks of the former 'naturalised biogenetic idiom' that regarded

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Franklin, 'Transforming Kinship', *eLS* 15 November (2013): 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470015902.a0005222.pub2>. Franklin's highly appreciated interdisciplinary research focusses on the social aspects of the introduction of new reproductive technologies since the 1980s and the understandings of the biological to which they give rise. For example, Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, eds., *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke

kinship as 'rooted in a prior domain of naturalised reproductive biology' ('Transforming Kinship', 3). The current view is formulated in explicit opposition to this 'biogenetic idiom'. It defines kinship as 'an actively negotiated process of continuous, and often strategic, recomposition out of varied elements rather than a pattern of predictable compliance with a received normative, or "given", social structure' (4). This view is presented as the outcome of not only a process of self-critical reflection within kinship studies, but also of actual changes in how people live as families in Western industrialised societies in general (1–2). The post-war nuclear family diversified as a result of the well-known changes in marriage, adoption and homosexual and other relationships. Moreover, new reproductive technologies made it possible for couples to achieve, as Franklin formulates it, 'technologically the form of biological parenthood that had previously been presumed as natural' (1). This concise formulation confirms the picture of a major change: from kinship 'presumed as natural' to kinship 'technologically achieved'. The latter is further explained as a 'cultural activity', 'chosen', 'made' (2) and 'built' (3). As such, it is comparable to the conscious kinning that takes place in new forms of transnational adoption. This major change leads to a 'general pattern . . . of increasingly hybrid kinship strategies' in how people live their kinship life (3). New varieties are not without connection to older views, however, as reflected in Franklin's idea of 'continuous recomposition out of varied elements'. For example, traditional models of kin connection influence the views of the new kinship technology and vice versa (4). This recomposition is, moreover, presented as an 'active process' and opposed to what sounds like a much more passive 'pattern of predictable compliance with a . . . given structure'. These formulations clearly favour the language of the 'made' above that of the 'given'.

On the one hand, Franklin clearly emphasises the major change in anthropology towards a model of kinship as a 'social technology', a 'social process through which valued identities and relationships are . . . "cultured"' (4). The novelty of the model lies in that it does away with the older idea of kinship as rooted in 'pregiven natural facts'. This model can even incorporate former views in an encompassing understanding: the 'old' perception of kinship as a natural phenomenon is itself discovered to be an 'actively negotiated' social process. Retroactively, the discovery of the made character of kinship reveals that kinship previously was much more

University Press, 2001); Sarah Franklin, *Biological Relatives: IVF, Stem Cells, and the Future of Kinship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

a matter of choice than the language of the natural suggests (3–4). On the other hand, Franklin continues to speak of *biological* parenthood and points out that traditional kinship views remain important in shaping new phenomena such as IVF and transnational adoption. The overall impression is thus rather complex and full of tensions. However, Franklin highlights the transformation more than the complexity or the continuities in perceiving kinship as biological. As such, her analysis resonates with the views from historical and empirical research that point out the synchronic and diachronic diversity in family life.

This focus on ‘transforming kinship’ – the title of Franklin’s survey – is in kinship anthropology often not just substantiated by the influence of the current differentiation of family forms and new technology, but also as the outcome of a methodological shift.<sup>40</sup> The old-school paradigm saw kinship as belonging to the non-Western world and originating in consanguinity. Kinship, then, refers to the extended family, which is regarded as of central importance to the organisation of so-called simple, undifferentiated or primitive societies.<sup>41</sup> In such basic kinship structures, natural and cultural aspects are mixed up. Western modern societies, on the other hand, clearly distinguish the biological from what is made or created. In this context, it is not kinship but the nuclear family that is of central importance.<sup>42</sup>

David Schneider is mentioned in many accounts as the founding father of the criticism of this paradigm.<sup>43</sup> In his 1984 *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, Schneider aims to unmask the European bias inherent in the dominant anthropological kinship paradigm from the nineteenth century onwards. It is biased in that it presupposes that kinship is a ‘distinct “thing”’ (175), of biological origin, which is also universal, and which subsequently takes shape in different kinship ‘systems’. This view persisted

<sup>40</sup> According to the Australian anthropologist Mary Patterson, this shift as a result of self-criticism only applies to the dominant sections of Anglophone anthropology, whereas the discipline developed in a different direction in, for example, France (‘Introduction: Reclaiming Paradigms Lost’, *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 16/1 (2005): 1–17, at 2). In her critical review of the so-called new kinship studies, Patterson also notices a more ambiguous relationship to the notion of biology than they acknowledge themselves. Biology is both ‘expunged’ and ‘foregrounded’, in particular in studies of new reproductive technologies (8).

<sup>41</sup> This is how David Schneider characterises the ‘conventional wisdom of anthropology’, referring to authors like H. S. Maine, L. H. Morgan, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, W. H. R. Rivers, E. Durkheim and B. Malinowski (*A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), e.g., 187).

<sup>42</sup> Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 15, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Schneider’s critique of European biologicistic views – foreshadowed in his earlier interest in the relation between nature and culture in *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (1968) – is related to a broader shift in anthropology away from a focus on social structures and functions towards one on meaning (Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values*, 3; Carsten, *After Kinship*, 18–19).



despite the introduction of a sharp distinction between the social and what Schneider calls physical kinship (189–90). This distinction was advocated by most anthropologists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to ‘free kinship from its simplistic formulation as a mere reflection of the state of biological relations of human reproduction’ (192). This distinction, however, could not be radical because physical kinship remained the most important ‘constraint on, or determinant of, social kinship’. Related to this view is the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fictive’ kinship, which presents the biological bond as giving a specific strength missing in other relationships (172–3). This hierarchy of bonds is also expressed in the aphorism ‘blood is thicker than water’, which summarises the paradigm well, according to Schneider (e.g., 165). It is on this assumption that anthropology’s ‘Doctrine of the Genealogical Unity of Mankind’ is based, which states that primary genealogical relations between parents, spouses, and their children are the same in every culture. Variations occur in the weaker relations beyond these primary ones, and these can therefore be studied comparatively (174, 188). In sum, kinship relations are seen as distinct, strong relationships based on reproduction.

According to Schneider, this view of kinship is not based on fact, but derived from the specific ideology of European culture (e.g., 174–5, 193–4). He identifies this as having a ‘biologistic’ conception of being human – that is, ‘formulated in terms of his place in nature, with a few caveats about his free will, intentionality, conscience and . . . extraordinary intelligence distinguishing him from other natural organisms’ (175). Common-sense views are uncritically integrated into the analytic terminology of the social sciences. It may not be ‘unreasonable’ to assume that ‘all people hold reproduction in as high value as we do’, but Schneider is not convinced that this is simply true (194). What happens in this way of studying kinship is that the anthropologist’s assumptions are imposed on the culture that is studied ‘blindly and with unflagging loyalty to those assumptions’ (196). As a result, little attention is paid to the specific character of the other culture and how meanings and values are shaped in this particular context. Almost all anthropological kinship studies thus assume beforehand what should rather be a question (198). The assumption has ‘never been tested because it has been assumed to be self-evident’ (199). This is not without irony, of course, as anthropology is committed to understanding other cultures without any ethnocentric bias (197).

Schneider’s confrontation with the Eurocentric perspective implied in the study of kinship seems to leave little room for the project as such of studying kinship, or even of speaking about kinship as a distinct kind of

relationship. Kinship seems to have become an obsolete concept.<sup>44</sup> From this perspective, the actual developments within anthropology after Schneider come as a surprise. The expected breakdown of the discipline did not occur. On the contrary, what is perceived as a new approach to kinship arose in which kinship is no longer regarded as typical of 'simple', non-Western societies. This combined well with an anthropological interest in the new kinship-related developments in the Western world as a result of reproductive technology, large-scale institutionalised adoption and changing family composition. The Western fertility clinic or households involved in international adoption became contexts for anthropological fieldwork. Other influences contributed positively, such as feminist thinking, which put gender and personhood on the agenda. This turned out to be a roundabout route to new engagements with kinship-related institutions like marriage, family and procreation.<sup>45</sup>

The anthropological criticism of the view of kinship as based on the natural fact of reproduction is worlds apart from the pleas for a renewed appreciation of the natural character of family as found in Almond and Browning. Almond refers briefly to anthropological analyses by Marilyn Strathern,<sup>46</sup> but she apparently does not feel the need to defend her approach against this criticism, nor does Browning. Schneider traces the view of kinship as natural back to its origins in a general biologicistic view of human beings that is typical of Europe. This analysis adds to our observation of the correspondence of Almond's and Browning's language of the natural to common parlance. Of course, Almond and Browning are primarily concerned with the European or Western context, but they do not make this explicit or show an awareness of how this context informs their conceptual framework. This is remarkable because this could easily have nuanced and, as a result, strengthened their approaches. In line with Schneider's criticism, they could have elaborated a view in which the precise way in which European culture gives or should give meaning to

<sup>44</sup> Maurice Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship*, translated by Nora Scott (London: Verso, 2011), 19–22. Schneider himself states that, for him, the solution to the biased study cannot simply be 'to study it differently', although he can 'see where others might wish to' (*A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, 200).

<sup>45</sup> For this analysis of the new kinship studies, see, for example, Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values*, 1; Carsten, *After Kinship*, 20–1.

<sup>46</sup> Almond (*The Fragmenting Family*, 96–7) highlights a remark from Strathern (*Reproducing the Future* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 34) in which she characterises the European views of kinship as having a 'biological base in procreation' and regarding it as 'a given baseline to human existence' and not something 'which only affects parents and children'. On the other hand, Almond immediately admits that 'social anthropologists are now more inclined to interpret kinship in cultural rather than biological terms'.

this natural fact of reproduction is outlined.<sup>47</sup> Such an approach, however, presupposes that the terminology of the natural does not speak for itself. Almond and Browning use it precisely as if its meaning were self-evident.

This brief comparison reveals the relevance of the methodological debate within kinship anthropology for our question of understanding family in relation to givenness. The unmasking of the Eurocentric focus on biology deepens the critical evaluation of the ethical views aiming for a restoration of the natural character of family. It also leads to the question of whether givenness may still be a meaningful notion if one attempts to get beyond this bias. Moreover, does kinship remain a meaningful notion at all if its distinctiveness can no longer be regarded as originating in biological facts? We will analyse these questions in relation to both the methodology of the anthropological studies and their outcomes – that is, the actual views of kinship they identify in different cultures. As we have already indicated, the studies point out that references to biology and nature are present in current Western views of kinship. They are seen as a problematic basis for anthropological methodology, however. What does this tension mean for the actual anthropological analysis of contemporary developments in kinship? To investigate this tension and its relevance for our study of family and givenness more closely, we will analyse some post-Schneider kinship studies by Marilyn Strathern and Sarah Franklin.

*Marilyn Strathern and Sarah Franklin: The Persistence of the Natural  
and Its Anthropological Unmasking*

Marilyn Strathern's work from the early 1990s is often presented as the most important pioneering research in this area of transformed kinship studies after Schneider, which nevertheless acknowledges his criticism (Franklin, *Biological Relatives*, 20; Carsten, *After Kinship*, 21). In these studies, Strathern combines insights from the methodological debate with studies of concrete kinship practices in her own British context and other parts of the world. She investigates in particular the interaction between what she regards as the old, traditional kinship discourses dominated by 'nature' or 'biology' and the new reproductive technologies of her day.<sup>48</sup> According to Strathern, the major change that results from new technologies is that kinship is no longer the domain par excellence of 'what

<sup>47</sup> Schneider himself quotes sociobiology to oppose the idea that 'blood is thicker than water' is true as a biological fact (199).

<sup>48</sup> Marilyn Strathern, *After Nature: English Kinship in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Strathern, *Reproducing the Future*.

is taken for granted' (*Reproducing the Future*, 16–21). It was precisely this taken-for-granted character that was expressed in the language of biology. Kin were called *biological* relatives. The term 'biological' did 'double symbolic service' (18), according to Strathern. First, as a 'taken-for-granted reference point', it functioned as the central defining characteristic of kin relations. Second, the biological indicated the level of the 'immutable or taken for granted in the human condition' (19).

Meanings started to change when reproductive technology was introduced as 'assisting nature'. Biological views nonetheless remain important. This is visible in that the reproductive technologies entail a primarily physical view of conceiving a child – that is, as a process which operates 'independently from human intention' and cannot be expressed in a social discourse of relations (Strathern, *Reproducing the Future*, 20–8). The same holds true for the view of personhood present in the discourse on these technologies. Personhood is perceived primarily as a physical entity that emerges at a specific point in the natural process between conception and birth (21–3). Strathern opposes this to a view of the 'person' as making sense only in the context of an existence in 'interdependence with other human beings'. As a result of the one-sided physical view, much of the debate concerning the use of embryos for scientific purposes focusses on the issue of when precisely the person comes into existence.

Another example of the prevalence and even reinforcement of the discourse of nature or biology is that assisted reproduction creates the categories of the 'biological parent' and the 'social parent' who lacks the 'biological credentials' (20). In spite of the fact that the biological parents only exist by virtue of the social parents, they are not regarded as socially unimportant, but as 'conferring identity' (24). This becomes clear in the conviction that the child has a right to know who his or her biological parents are, which is by now the leading argument in a variety of national legislations on sperm and egg donation. Social parenthood, on the other hand, is seen as more meaningful than biological relationships or surrogacy as such. Nevertheless, Strathern points out that 'the social' remains a category that exists only 'by reference to a non-social aspect of development' that lies at its basis (25). Social parenthood is, moreover, perceived as uncertain in comparison to the certain fact of biological parenthood, which is shown in the fact that it should be assisted or protected by law. Of course, there is also legislation on the rights of biological donor parents, but this functions to confirm their non-social character.

The fact that kinship is now 'doubly assisted' by technology and by law indicates the core of the change to which Strathern points: kinship is no

longer in the category of 'taken for granted' (20). This, according to Strathern, removes the former distinctiveness of the domain of kinship. Nevertheless, she states that in the future it may very well be that the idea of a 'natural basis' will persist (28). Its meaning will be influenced by actual developments in biology and genetics.

Strathern not only analyses this disappearance of the taken-for-granted character; she is also critical of its effects, in particular of a new dominance of the choice paradigm.<sup>49</sup> Whereas kin relations were formerly regarded as 'non-negotiable', of a 'given nature' and 'immutable', Strathern argues, people are now 'urged always to exercise preference and choice' (28), also in these relations.<sup>50</sup> It is now possible to think in entirely new ways of procreation as 'subject to personal preference and choice' and of children as embodying this choice (34). Strathern points out that this view implies a specific meaning of 'choice' shaped by the rise of an 'Enterprise Culture' (35). Within this matrix, choice based on individual desire – 'who wants what' (32) – is regarded as the basic principle of human acting. As regards the new reproductive technology, the desire at stake is having 'a child of one's own' (20). This desire is widely assumed to be human. When 'nature fails' – as so expressed in common parlance – this desire is the legitimate basis for 'intervening in biology'. People seeking such assistance are regarded not as ill or disabled, but as 'customers seeking services' (35). Strathern's critical remarks concern the inconsistency, even 'absurdity' of thinking in terms of choice only: thus, choice becomes a 'prescription' rather than an 'enablement' (36). There is no longer any measure to 'enterprise' (35), no limit to desire (57). Enterprise Culture no longer reckons with an opposite of choice, like 'life from which intervention is absent' (57), or a 'given' symbolised in biology (34–5). There may still be a 'given', but this is no longer defined by nature itself, but by what technology makes possible. Technological services may still be regarded as a form of 'assisting nature' and of achieving the parents' desire that is in its turn also viewed as 'natural' (57). However, this 'nature' is no longer a real opposite to choice, as the effects of physiology once were. Strathern does not go as far as pleading for such a limit to choice, but she does point out the one-sided voluntarist language as problematic because of its limitless character. Moreover, she remarks that people also fear this

<sup>49</sup> Strathern openly acknowledges this in her introduction and calls it 'criticising anthropology-fashion: to make its new analogies work for how we might think old problems' (*Reproducing the Future*, 8).

<sup>50</sup> The central example of this pattern of thinking is the 1989 'Glover Report on Reproductive Technologies to the European Commission', which she characterises as 'suffused with an ideology of preference and choice' (Strathern, *Reproducing the Future*, 28).

boundlessness, which becomes clear in the anxiety that surrounds new technology (57–8). Strathern's conclusion that 'there seems nothing that is not the result of, or at least shows the encroachment of, human enterprise upon it' sounds like a complaint (50).

In her criticism of the lack of contrast between 'what is given in the world with what is artificial' and her thoughts about the future consequences of this view (60), Strathern comes close to moral reflection on whether these are good developments.<sup>51</sup> Thus, she herself indicates the relevance of her analyses for ethics. These analyses are precisely what was lacking in the ethical pleas for a renewed appreciation of the natural character of family in Almond and Browning. The latter two do not analyse the actual developments that have contributed to a less self-evident understanding of family as natural, nor do they address the tension that continues to exist with the equally present interest in views of naturalness. Strathern's different approach shows that the language of the natural may be analysed for its power to express the opposite of choice, the taken-for-granted character of kinship. This meta-reflection may even be used constructively as an argument in favour of the use of this language. Strathern herself, despite her critical observations, does not go into a more elaborate ethical reflection. Nor does she feel the need to explain why she does not. She seems to regard the anthropologist's task as pointing to the shifts in meaning and the inconsistencies or paradoxes that result from it.

It is remarkable that Strathern claims in passing that the paradoxes which result from the changing views of the natural do not afflict the terminology of anthropology itself. From the perspective of an anthropologist, she says, the 'biological facts' are also 'cultural facts' – that is, 'constructs that are themselves socially or culturally motivated' (28). Moreover, the 'concept of culture is already problematised' in anthropology, just like the notion of the 'artefact' (60). The anthropological concepts thus seem to already have left the troubles of ordinary language and practices behind. Anthropology seems to be viewed as helping Europeans wake up to the fact that 'future kinship' will no longer provide them with 'metaphors for the natural givens of human existence nor with metaphors for regeneration through the spontaneous effects of procreation' (61). These remarks are clearly rooted in the aforementioned methodological struggle to liberate anthropology from the view of kinship as natural or

<sup>51</sup> Examples of passages that touch upon the normative are found in, for example, Strathern, *Reproducing the Future*, 30, 35, 57, 59.

biological. It is not clear how precisely they relate to her observation of the prevalence of the language of the natural and to her critical evaluation of a one-sided focus on choice. Is the concept of 'cultural construct' compatible with the experiences of family as 'given' and not 'chosen' or 'made'? These questions recall the discrepancy found in Franklin's analyses between a recent change to a focus on choice in kinship views and the persistence of the language of the natural. Again, we trace a moment of an impasse in the understanding of family: the anthropological critique of the views of family as given cannot be harmonised with the anthropological observation of the actual persistence of these views. In the anthropological methodological meta-language, this impasse is not visible due to the dominance of the former perspective, which leaves less room for elaborating on the latter experiences of givenness or what is taken for granted.

A similar incongruence or impasse can be noticed in another text by Franklin, her large monograph *Biological Relatives* on the consequences of new reproductive technology which dates from the same year as the aforementioned survey article. In this book, Franklin uses reproductive technology, in particular IVF, as a looking glass for understanding the broader issue of the changing views of what counts as natural or biological. Franklin concludes that 'biology has become a technology' while technology is becoming 'more "biologized"' (3). By this she refers to practices like the technological making of cells and working with genes as well as to the fact that new human life is made via this technology. In vitro fertilisation is a good case study for analysing how such new technological developments are appropriated. Franklin emphasises that, at first sight, IVF clearly seems to 'reproduce dominant kinship patterns' as it focusses on the 'biological fertilization of two gametes' and a 'biologically based system of descent and family formation' (6). The new technique thus does not seem to change the existing views of kinship as something 'natural'. This may also explain why it has rapidly become 'normalized', almost 'routine'. However, Franklin discovered in her research that people who undergo IVF do not simply experience it that way. They are much more ambivalent about it. Apparently, IVF also 'challenges or contradicts' existing views and norms (7). Franklin regards this ambivalence as typical of how technology in general is experienced at present.

So far, Franklin's analyses reveal the persistence of references to what is natural in kinship views. The impasse can be seen when we look at the way Franklin recaps these developments in technology and biology. In her summarising passages, she speaks only of 'the emergence of biological relativity' (4) and not so much of the persistence of the paradigm of the



natural. By 'relativity', Franklin indicates 'a process through which the biological has become a more explicitly contingent, or relative, condition' (16). It is the process in which 'nature and artifice became interchangeable' (21). In this process, biology is 'not only denaturalized but "cultured up"' (4). This interpretation of current developments as relativising what was once natural and thus absolute sounds similar to the emphasis in Franklin's conclusions concerning the social character of kinship. Moreover, this interpretation is just as well projected backwards onto earlier forms of kinship, which are then discovered to be 'characterized by enormous flexibility in spite of often being tied to deterministic models' (16). Franklin refers to Strathern's research to underscore how well IVF displays this relativity. Strathern shows, she argues, the 'irony' of IVF which 'explicitly artificialized the very facts of life that were formerly imagined to ground the natural origins of gender and sex: these facts were rendered contingent, or relativized, by the very technology developed to "assist" them' (20–1). Franklin calls this the 'paradox of IVF' (21, 29): the technology developed to serve to 'reproduce biological offspring' at the same time as it 'denaturalized biological reproduction' (21). Franklin points out how her analyses are nourished by a broader critique of models of sex, gender and reproduction coming from feminist thinking (19–20). Feminism challenged the biologism that regards 'natural' characteristics as implying certain automatic behaviour or roles and pointed out the social character of arrangements concerned with these topics. Judith Butler is quoted approvingly for her theory of 'technologies of gender' (183). Butler's analysis that in gender constructions a 'naturalized origin' is imagined 'as if it were prior to the cultural expectations it confirms' is also valid for the ways in which IVF is imagined, according to Franklin. In all these interpretive, summarising moments of Franklin's argument, there is a clear emphasis on the downplaying of the meaning of the natural. As a result, the analysis of its persistence is less understandable.

### *The Difficulty of Accounting for Kinship as Given*

Strathern and Franklin share a critical thread related to Schneider's aim of unmasking of what counts as 'natural' in kinship relations, as in fact 'relative' or a 'cultural construct'. Strathern relates this criticism to the methodological change in anthropology, but also to the actual decrease of the taken-for-granted character in current Western views of kinship. Recent developments in reproductive technology are crucial to this change. Her focus on these developments makes her no less aware, however, of the

persistence of some kind of language of 'the natural' nor less interested in the precise meanings of this language. Moreover, she is critical of the idea of limitless choice that results from the absence of a real opposite to choice, like the givenness of nature once was. Such givenness is not taken into account constructively, however, in her anthropological understanding of kinship as cultural construct. A similar tension, or even an impasse, can be seen in Franklin. She concludes that biology is cultured up and thus relativised as a result of recent reproductive technology, whereas the latter is all but an expression of this relativising. Central to this technology is the importance of having a 'child of one's own' – that is, a biologically related child. The rise of this technology is unthinkable without a strong notion of natural kinship. Franklin's main aim, however, seems to be to unmask this notion – for example, by pointing out that this notion is incompatible with experiences of people who actually undergo IVF. This impasse visible in both authors indicates that the aspect of givenness is difficult to incorporate in the anthropological terminology, although they are very well aware of it.

We also analyse the anthropological debate because it gives deeper insight into current ways of dealing with family as given in Western contexts. The new kinship anthropology in particular studies kinship in settings in which it is an issue, as in the case of adoption or the use of reproductive technology. In these contexts, there are clear signs of a greater emphasis on choice in the understanding of kinship. Kinship is seen as a domain under human influence and no longer as obvious and unchangeable. On the other hand, human influence on kinship is still made sense of against the background of something given. Human intervention is regarded as contributing to something that is already there but needs support, in particular the longing for a family, the wish to have children. This view of kinship as given also implies that there is something good to it. Our general characterisation of our time as having difficulty with the notion of givenness may thus be specified. There is indeed a dominant discourse of choice, but a feeling for givenness is not entirely absent. The two even come together in paradoxical notions like characterising reproductive science as 'assisting nature'. The language of the natural seems to remain the self-evident discourse to express this given aspect of the family. Both the works of Strathern and Franklin thus reveal a tension in contemporary Western developments between a decrease and an increase in understanding kinship as natural.

The paradigm shift in the anthropological approach away from 'nature' leaves, however, little room to account for the tension visible in contemporary Western kinship views. We noticed the moments of impasse that

arise as a result of it. The shift leads to an anthropological terminology dominated by the idea that kinship is a cultural construct and not to be 'presumed as natural'. This terminology implies disapproval of the tendency to think of kinship in natural terms because it conceals that it is in fact a cultural construct. Such a construct may imply references to what is natural or given, but it is important to acknowledge that, in fact, nothing is given in any substantial sense. This disapproval of the language of the natural and givenness recalls the opposite disapproval found in Almond and Browning, in the sense that both lack a clear underpinning and do not stimulate moral reflection on what precisely family or kinship means. In both cases, it is unclear how these pleas can be related to the contemporary situation as they analyse it – that is, as either lacking an awareness of the natural or as characterised by a persistence of it. We earlier criticised this ethical thinking as ending moral reflection rather than giving rise to it. In this respect, the anthropological accounts generate more reflection because they also lay bare the ambiguity of the actual situation in which technology both undoes biological views and reinforces them. The moments of impasse that we observed are again fruitful for our project because they point out the need for a different level and mode of reflection, one in which the ambiguity can be accounted for without solving it. This is another impulse to a mystery approach. The anthropological analyses refrain from giving a full moral judgement on the developments, which may be explained by the more descriptive character of their anthropological approach. Neither do they aim for a systematic analysis of the meanings of kinship or propose an alternative definition of kinship that incorporates its character as a cultural construct. As a result, they do not reflect on the difficulty of naming the meanings of kinship, although their material reveals this difficulty, in particular as regards the aspect of givenness.

A more systematic reflection on the meanings of kinship and the difficulty to name them can perhaps be found in a recent book by Marshall Sahlins, an anthropologist who has dealt with the problematic character of references to biology and nature since early in his career.<sup>52</sup> In his book with the significant title *What Kinship Is – And Is Not* (2013), he aims to arrive at an alternative understanding of kinship – that is, as 'mutuality of being'. Sahlins' argument is not presented as an ethical one either, but his polemics against the understanding of kinship in terms of nature or biology are

<sup>52</sup> For example, Marshall Sahlins, *The Use and Abuse of Biology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1976); *Hierarchy, Equality, and the Sublimation of Anarchy: The Western Illusion of Human Nature*, Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at the University of Michigan November 4 2005, <https://bit.ly/3XWYtf7> (later published at Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2008).

much more fierce, which may be why he feels compelled to come up with an alternative account. This makes his approach relevant to our question of how family as a distinct sphere and family as a given relate to each other. Moreover, this publication shows that, despite more than thirty years of anthropological debate since Schneider, the issue of the natural character of kinship has not yet been settled. Apparently, the understanding in terms of the natural is persistent in current Western views of kinship. Why is the debate not regarded as long past? Again, we will analyse this debate with an eye to what it reveals about the status of givenness in our time.

*Marshall Sahlins' 'Mutuality of Being': Understanding Kinship beyond Biology*

Sahlins' book is intended as an indictment of the view that biology is the basis of kinship and a demonstration of the idea (2) that 'as constituted from birth to death and even beyond, kinship is culture, all culture' (89).<sup>53</sup> Strikingly, what was an accomplished fact for Strathern twenty years earlier is for Sahlins a point that still needs to be combatted: 'kinship is not biology'. At the same time, Sahlins acknowledges from the outset that '[i]t seems fair to say that the current anthropological orthodoxy in kinship studies can be summed up in the proposition that any relationship constituted in terms of procreation, filiation, or descent can also be made postnatally or performatively by culturally appropriate action' (2). Moreover, he starts his argument with the concession that Schneider has already convincingly shown from 1968 onwards that the idea that "blood" ties are "natural" and irrecoverable' is part of 'our native folklore' (4) – that is, of the American or Western context. Sahlins' arguments for returning to the old issue of unmasking biologicistic views are hard to identify. The main part of the book consists of numerous ethnographic examples intended to demonstrate the incorrectness of the biologicistic views. Constructively, the examples serve to underpin his alternative view that kinship is 'mutuality of being'. Apparently, Sahlins regards this alternative view as a new and urgent contribution to the old nature–culture debate. As a reader, one starts to wonder why it is so difficult to leave behind the idea of the biological character of kinship. Or should one rather wonder why it remains important to oppose biologicistic views in anthropology?

If one tries to identify the biologicistic views that are still present, according to Sahlins, a clear picture does not arise. The few references to the views

<sup>53</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *What Kinship Is – And Is Not* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

are sketchy and usually formulated rather tendentiously. In these vague hints, two variants seem to be present: hidden and explicit biologicistic views. First of all, Sahlins signals that, in anthropology, also among what he calls constructivists, and even for Schneider himself, it is difficult to completely do away with the nature–culture distinction. Precisely in arguing against a biologicistic understanding of kinship, the constructivists remain focussed on consanguinity. Affinity, the other side of kinship, apparently does not need to be unmasked as ‘made’. Sahlins quotes Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who argues that ‘the sense of an organic connection is merely extended from the sphere of the given to that of the constructed’.<sup>54</sup> As a result, ‘biology is still there, only it has less value than it had before, and sometimes less value than the socially constituted’. Even Schneider reproduced the contrast between the ‘given’ and the ‘made’ he himself had exposed in Western kinship views. Without being aware of this, he reproduces it in distinguishing a ‘cultural system of symbols and meanings’ from ‘social action’ (Sahlins, *What Kinship Is*, 14). The former is then defined as ‘static and “given”’, while human action only deals with a ‘normative system’ that is ‘processual’ and ‘appropriate to decision making or interaction models of analysis’.<sup>55</sup> Apart from this hidden continuation of the old distinction, there is the explicit one of anthropologists, accompanied by sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists, who have ‘long contended’ the distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fictive’ kinship.<sup>56</sup> The former is seen as ‘established by birth’, ‘genealogical’ or a tie of ‘blood’, while the latter is said to be ‘only a metaphor’. Sahlins states that this view has been dominant in kinship anthropology since Lewis Morgan formulated it in 1871, with only some minor revisions over the course of time (64). The ‘decisive fallacy’ of such a view is that it ‘takes the parents of the child out of their social contexts and presumes they are abstract beings, without any identity except a genital one, who produce an equally abstract child out of the union of their bodily substances’ (74). Sahlins hints not only at the dangers of these hidden and explicit continuations of the biologicistic views, but also at those of a deconstructionist view. This concludes from the

<sup>54</sup> Sahlins, *What Kinship Is*, 11; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘The Gift and the Given: Three Nano-Essays on Kinship and Magic’, in *Kinship and Beyond: The Genealogical Model Reconsidered*, ed. by Sandra Bamford and James Leach (New York: Berghahn, 2009), 237–68.

<sup>55</sup> Sahlins, *What Kinship Is*, 13. Sahlins also criticises Schneider’s analogy of kinship and ‘Native American concepts of “nationalism” and again “religion”’ as parallel aspects of society that should not be regarded as belonging to the ontological level of culture (14).

<sup>56</sup> Sahlins, *What Kinship Is*, 63. Without going into details, Sahlins mentions four protagonists of this view, dating back to the nineteenth-century Lewis Henry Morgan as the founding father of this genealogical view of kinship (64).

flexible and instable character of kinship practices that kinship is no longer a meaningful category (9).

Over against these imprecisely demarcated fronts, Sahlins advances his own view. Kinship relations do have a distinctive quality, that of 'mutuality of being'.<sup>57</sup> This relates to experiences which Sahlins indicates with different formulations: being 'intrinsic to' or 'participating in' one another's existence, being 'mutual persons', 'intersubjective belonging', 'transbodily being' and 'mystical' experiences 'whereby what one person does or suffers also happens to others' (2). These formulations recall those of Butler and Ciavatta in Chapter 2. With the term 'mutuality of being', Sahlins claims to cover all kinds of kinship relations among all cultures, which does not mean he is 'trying to prove empirically what kinship is' (2). He relates this view to a 'tradition that stretches back from Strathern, Marriott, and Bastide; through Leenhardt, Lévy-Bruhl, and Durkheim; to certain passages of Aristotle on the distinctive friendship of kinship' (20). Salient examples of 'mutuality of being' range from the Maori expression of 'being born in the other', the English 'belonging to each other', the Nyakyusa (Africa) 'being members of each other' or the Karembola (Madagascar) 'being one people', 'people of one kind' or 'owning one another' (21–3). These relations can be formed by 'commensality, sharing food, reincarnation, co-residence, shared memories, working together, blood brotherhood, adoption, friendship, shared suffering, and so on' – that is, in 'indefinitely many' ways (8, cf. 68). Sahlins mentions these examples of what he calls 'performative modes of kinship' to show that kinship is not 'given by birth as such' and that the 'valuation of the genitor and genetrix' can be very different, even one of exclusion of both (3). Moreover, intervention by a spiritual third party, like ancestors, gods, spirits or 'the potency acquired from captured enemies' (4), is often seen as necessary for 'producing another human being'. Finally, different substances can be involved in the connection of genitors and their offspring, like 'blood, semen, milk, bone, genes, flesh soul, etc.'. Sahlins concludes that 'there is nothing inevitable about the kinship of procreation' as even men can be mothers and women fathers (5).

Sahlins' aim in establishing this idea of kinship as 'mutuality of being' is to do justice to how kinship is shaped across different cultures. Central to his approach is that it is the larger 'kinship order' and not primarily birth relationships that determine the meanings of kinship (65, 76). Sahlins also points out why this has not been noticed enough in anthropology that

<sup>57</sup> Sahlins uses the phrase 'mutuality of being' in his 2005 Tanner Lectures as well to characterise kinship and refers to Aristotle as the origin of the phrase (Sahlins, *Hierarchy, Equality*, 98).

remained fixed on biology, birth and procreation. The cause lies in an individualistic view of human beings and thus also of their relationships, one that is, again, typical of the Western world. The complementarity of biologism and egocentrism has caused distortions in Western anthropological analyses of other cultures. Kinship is approached as 'lived and learned by individuals' also in its organised forms in society as a whole (66). Sahlins realises he is not the first to point to this contrast between Western views and those of other cultures, and refers to the nineteenth-century anthropologist E. B. Tylor (31), as well as to Strathern's discussion of the 'dividual' Melanesian view of persons for similar ideas (24). Strathern's discussion aims explicitly to point out an alternative to the 'autonomous Western individual – which in any case does not describe such individuals in their own family and kindred contexts' (25). In Strathern, as well as in anthropology in general, however, this taking into account of dividual views of human beings did not correct their being focussed on the individual person. It rather stimulated it by engaging with a new, relational view of the person as composed of everything he or she shares with particular others.

Sahlins analyses this attention to persons as 'composite sites of the relationships that produced them' (24) as less radical than his own view of 'mutuality of being' or 'intersubjective existence' (28). 'Mutuality of being' makes a stronger, fundamental contrast with the individualistic view by denying the 'necessary independence of the entities so related, as well as the necessary substantiality and physicality of the relationship' (32). Sahlins' idea of participating in each other's existence is thus not something secondary, something that takes place between beings that 'are given beforehand' (33). It is 'necessary for beings to be given and exist'.<sup>58</sup> The fundamental character is also expressed in Sahlins' suggestion that this participation is 'an inherent disposition of human sociality and the distinctive quality of kinship' (43). Acknowledging this disposition would imply a paradigm shift, which Sahlins describes as sending the 'egocentric anthropology of kinship' to the 'dustbin of superseded paradigms'.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Sahlins refers to Leenhardt's 1949 commentary on the notebooks of Lévy-Bruhl and his idea of participation as 'shared existence'.

<sup>59</sup> Sahlins suggests 'mutuality of being' as such an inherent human disposition at the conclusion of a 'parenthetical' section (*What Kinship Is*, 37–44) on the findings of experimental research among young infants by the developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello and others. This research discovered a capacity to 'synthesize the distinction of self and other in interactively created common projects that involve shared interests, perspectives and goals' (37). This capacity is called 'shared intentionality', 'we-ness' or 'we-intentionality'. Sahlins observes a lot of correspondence between this psychological view and his own idea of 'mutuality of being', also as regards its contrasting with the reigning research focus on the individual.



In Sahlins' conception, 'mutuality of being' does not just refer to the ways kinship is constituted, but also to the ways it is lived, the practices and experiences distinctive of people so related. The solidarity in their being may, for example, result in their knowing 'each other's doings and sufferings as their own' (45). They may 'immediately feel' what has happened to their kinsmen as something that also happens to themselves.<sup>60</sup> Experience as a bodily sensation is, then, not confined to the individual, but 'diffused among persons'. Sahlins quotes Monica Wilson, who calls this idea of diffused experience among kin 'mystical interdependence' (46). She refers to mourning customs in which the living share in the death of their kin by, for example, consuming parts of the deceased or by self-mutilation, tearing clothes or withdrawing from everyday practices like washing oneself or working, as well as by temporarily taking on themselves the identity of the deceased. A similar unity or 'immanence in one another' is also recorded regarding relations between spouses (48). Examples of this are women's sharing in the experience of absent husbands or men in their wives' menstruation, pregnancy and giving birth (49). 'Mutuality of being' also makes intelligible the transmission of sins from the father to his children and other kin. Other examples are the experiences of sharing in the suffering of a relative and the shame or disgrace related to it, which is, for example, visible in the fact that all relatives are compensated for the suffering of one (50–1). In a different way, this sharing is visible in that kin take responsibility for the well-being of their relative's body, in feeding and caring for it, which implies a social understanding of the body (51–2). Eating can then be experienced as not a response to individual needs, but as a recognition of relationships; the eating of the one person directly affects the well-being of the other. Sahlins summarises all these practices and experiences by concluding that 'among kinfolk neither interest nor agency are individual facts – again in contrast to the self-fashioning, self-interested individual as we know him . . . Agency is in the unity of the duality; it is an act of we-ness' (52–3).

Striking in Sahlins' book is that this detailed, varied and subtle exposition of the idea of kinship as 'mutuality of being' is accompanied by such a fierce polemics against biologicistic views that lacks nuance. As we have seen, Sahlins does not specify the authors or branches in anthropology precisely in which the biologicistic views prevail nor explain how this prevalence is possible, given the long-standing anthropological criticism. Neither does he give a detailed

<sup>60</sup> Sahlins takes this quote from J. Prytz Johansen's studies of the Maori (1954), from which he often cites. It is remarkable that Sahlins refers to this 'immediacy' of feeling, as he himself seems to state precisely the opposite just before – that is, the sharing of experiences should not be understood 'in the sense of direct sensation, of course, but at the level of meaning' (*What Kinship Is*, 44).

argument as to why this biologism is so problematic. He only states that it demonstrates an individualistic view of human beings and their relatedness and thus does not do justice to the many ethnographic reports of non-Western societies in particular. Apparently, however, the latter ethnographic research was attentive to the non-genealogical character of kinship and thus did not suffer from a biologicistic and individualistic bias at all. Sahlins nevertheless states that it is 'high time to investigate these culturally variable conceptions of conception' (76, cf. 74 'rarely if ever'), which suggests that this has not been done before. The necessity of a change is emphasised by stating that what is 'ethnographically at stake' here is 'the hypothesis that relations of procreation are patterned by the kinship order in which they are embedded'. This hypothesis is apparently not yet established truth, in spite of the fact that ethnographic reports to the contrary are so easily available. Sahlins does not explain this either.<sup>61</sup>

Towards the end of the book, however, one discussion stands out that does not seem to fit into this radical rejection of the biological view. It opens with Sahlins' avowal that 'a problem remains'. This concerns kinship relations established after birth and beyond genealogical ties. The problem is that these relations are 'nevertheless formulated in (apparently) genealogical terms' (72). Does this not show, Sahlins then suggests rhetorically, that 'in the end kinship is founded on biological relationships?' He answers by referring to 'innovative discussions of the problem' by Robert McKinley (1981). McKinley denies that these 'genealogical-cum-biological' formulations reveal a biological foundation. Rather, these meanings are 'metaphors borrowed from folk biology' (72–3). He explains this metaphorical use only by stating that 'folk biology provides the closest conceptual model for this type of linkability' which is, in fact, social. Genealogy offers a cultural construction of the biological facts that are supposed to be 'pre-existing'. Earlier on in his argument, Sahlins attacked the theories of fictive kinship because they explain non-genealogical kinship as secondary, expressed in a metaphorical use of the terminology of primary, biological relations.

<sup>61</sup> The role of ethnographic material in more general reflections on the meaning of kinship is a delicate one. A striking example of this in a recent volume on the meaning of parenthood (see Chapter 1, notes 29, 30 and 32) is the reference to the culture of the Mosuo or Na in south-west China to support two opposing views of kinship. The sociologist Judith Stacey refers to this and other examples to demonstrate the diversity of family life. In the next chapter, anthropologist Peter Wood argues that, in general, societies prefer clearly identifiable parents who bear responsibility for their children. 'Fictive kin' are exceptions to this main pattern. See Judith Stacey, 'Uncoupling Marriage and Parenting', in *What Is Parenthood? Contemporary Debates about the Family*, ed. by Linda C. McClain and Daniel Cere (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 65–84, and Peter Wood, 'The Anthropological Case for the Integrative Model', in *What Is Parenthood?*, 65–104.

Now, however, it becomes clear that birth itself is the metaphor. 'Primary terms are already metaphorical', for they do not necessarily imply a 'substantive connection' between parents and with their child (73). Sahlins admits that parent-child and sibling terms are indeed used broadly to denote kinship relations. He states this is because of their social character – that is, of being relations of co-existence and 'mutuality of being' (73–4) and not because they are 'logically or temporally prior to culture, let alone to kinship' (77). A final relevant remark as regards biologism is then found in the modestly formulated but far-reaching conclusion: 'It is probably better not to speak of "biology" at all, folk or otherwise, since few or no peoples other than Euro-Americans understand themselves to be constructed upon – or in fundamental ways, against – some biological-corporeal substratum. For many their kinship is already given in their flesh' (77). The rest of the book consists mainly in ethnographic reports that demonstrate this idea of kinship as 'already given in their flesh'.

In these final passages, we observe again the tension between the anthropological understanding of kinship as 'all culture' and the actual ethnographic material which displays connotations of givenness. Sahlins' overview of meanings of kinship clearly shows that genealogical terminology abounds, even in the designation of non-genealogical relations. The polemics of a correct cultural view over against an incorrect biological view do not stimulate an elaborate reflection on the biological language that is nevertheless present. Again, we observe a moment of impasse. The questions rise why precisely these metaphors of birth, parent-child and sibling relations dominate, and what they mean when their use is metaphorical. These issues are not explored. Neither do Sahlins' polemics create room for a clear analysis of what precisely is wrong about the metaphorical use of the language of biology or nature. Is not the terminology that Sahlins proposes as an alternative, kinship as 'given in one's flesh' (77), also such a metaphor? The reason this language would be inherently individualistic is not expressed in an extensive argument either, but is again polemically suggested by Sahlins. In principle, it does not seem impossible at all to have a relational understanding of biological or genetic relations, even up to an idea of transpersonal being. Sahlins does not consider this option of a meaningful metaphorical use of biological language.

#### *The Aversion to Biologistic Views and Givenness as Mystery*

We turned to Sahlins' recent text because he formulates a view of kinship as 'mutuality of being', which he emphatically introduces as an alternative to the incorrect biological views. This suggested a more systematic approach

to the study of the meanings of kinship than was found in the studies of Strathern and Franklin. In the end, however, Sahlins' proposal of an alternative terminology does not take the form of a systematic theory of 'mutuality of being', in which the meanings of this notion are elaborated in detail, or different strands and sub-meanings are distinguished. Rather, he gives various concrete examples from non-Western cultures that illustrate the non-biological character of kinship: kinship is established by different practices like living or working together or sharing food, in which diverse substances may be involved, but also by shared suffering or friendship. Often even death cannot undo these relations. Apart from the detailed examples, more general characterisations of kinship figure, like 'being intrinsic to' or 'participating in' one another's existence. These are loosely related to the overarching term 'mutuality of being'. The alternative terminology seems to be deliberately indefinite or open, and consists of uncommon expressions.

Sahlins does not reflect on this open and uncommon character of his terms or build an argument in favour of it, but the terminology clearly displays an awareness of the difficulty to name what kinship means: new words or expressions taken from non-Western cultures are needed to capture these meanings. Moreover, some of these expressions also have the connotation of a sacred dimension, as shown in Sahlins' qualifications like 'mystical' and involving a 'spiritual third party'. Again, this does not mean that we find in his text an elaborate argument in favour of acknowledging the difficulty of making sense of kinship or a theory on the character of kinship language. However, Sahlins' search for alternative, non-biological terms and his highlighting of uncommon, indefinite expressions clearly resonate with our approach to family as mystery. Sahlins offers language which acknowledges this mystery character. Although Sahlins does not arrive at such general conclusions, 'mutuality of being' seems to point out that kinship is about being related in a way that is so fundamental that people become part of each other. They cannot be imagined on their own. This means that 'being' is experienced as fundamentally relational. People cannot be seen apart from their relations. The moments in which this is experienced are in part described as implying an experience of the sacred. Sahlins' examples of mutuality of being thus provide us with new terms that seem suited to evoke family as mystery.

In addition, one may wonder whether the anthropological criticism of biological views in general may not be seen as an appeal to acknowledge this mystery character. Is not the heart of this criticism that biological views falsely suggest a clarity – that is, that kinship relations result only from being someone's genetic descendant? This is a clear view, but one that

simplifies and cannot account for the great diversity of kinship views present among cultures. It moreover suggests that all meanings attributed to kinship should be seen as secondary, a making sense of facts. There is little awareness of mystery in this account which founds kinship in facts. Perhaps concrete meanings attributed to kinship may sound 'mysterious', but these are not seen as expressions of what kinship actually is – that is, a relation based on procreation. Anthropology unmasks these biological views of kinship as displaying a Western understanding of the world in which facts revealed by the sciences are primary and human beings are seen as autonomous individuals. This analysis deepens our criticism of the use of the language of the natural in ethical views on family. There we concluded that this language due to its claim of obviousness ends moral reflection rather than giving rise to it. The anthropological criticism confirms this characterisation and clarifies why moral reflection is not stimulated: the level of the factual is distinguished as primary from the secondary one of 'meaning'. The true core of kinship remains its basis in procreation. Meanings as expressed in, for example, religious symbols may deepen the awareness of this core, like Browning argued, but they remain contingent. This distinction between primary and secondary does not give rise to the question of what the genetic tie means also for our acting. Meaning is displaced by the facts. Family is there where genetically related people share their lives.

While the anthropological criticism thus confirms and deepens our argument to acknowledge the difficulty of naming what family might mean, we also noticed moments of impasse. The dominance of this criticism results in an inability to take into account the references to nature, biology or birth in kinship views. The unmasking of the biological theory of kinship as incorrect implies the incorrectness of such 'folk' notions in which the language of the natural prevails. Strathern and Franklin reveal that these notions are still present in the Western context in which kinship is at the same time more and more perceived as 'made' by means of technology or by actively chosen kinship in the form of adoption. Sahlins finally admits that, among non-Western cultures, kinship language that refers to parent–child and sibling relations is widespread even if the actual kinship relations are not established by birth. All three authors disapprove of this quasi-factual language and emphasise that anthropology unmasks it as a cultural construct or metaphorical. The room criticism of biological views creates to analyse the precise character of the constructions of kinship in our time is not fully put to use due to the dominance of the polemical nature of the analyses.

Why is this polemics so dominant that it leads to these impasses? The heated character of the debate shows once more that family is a topic on which passions run high. Something is clearly at stake in this subject and in particular in the view of family as natural or biological. The debate on this view is not regarded as settled, but continues up to today. This underlines the observations on the controversial character of the topic of family from which we started our research. Critics of the paradigm shift in anthropology away from nature notice the dominance of this polemics as well.<sup>62</sup> Ironically, they see a Western preoccupation in this fight. The anthropologist Warren Shapiro claims to have been a critic of the ‘new kinship studies’ for decades and to follow in Schneider’s footsteps. He includes Sahlins’ recent book among the new kinship studies.<sup>63</sup> Shapiro accuses these studies of creating a false ‘West/Rest’ dichotomy as regards kinship.<sup>64</sup> He refutes the dichotomy by an ‘extensionist argument’ as regards kinship (‘Extensionism’, 191) based on ethnographic material. This material shows, according to Shapiro, that not only in the West, but also in many non-Western settings kinship ideas are in fact ‘grounded in native appreciations of procreation’ and are extended from this base to ‘other areas of experience’ (‘What Human Kinship Is’, 140). Shapiro explains the new kinship studies’ insensitivity to these ethnographic facts by the label some of them claim for themselves – that is, of a branch of deconstructionist ways of thinking.<sup>65</sup> According to Shapiro, the suspicion against Western

<sup>62</sup> Sahlins’ book was preceded by two smaller articles in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (17/1 (2011): 2–19; 17/2 (2011): 227–42) that contain the thrust of his later book. Warren Shapiro was the first to react to it in the form of a two-page comment in the same journal (Warren Shapiro, ‘Extensionism and the Nature of Kinship’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18/1 (2012): 191–3). It was followed two years later by a long article (Warren Shapiro, ‘Contesting Marshall Sahlins on Kinship’, *Oceania* 84/1, (2014): 19–37). The earlier brief comment was followed by two brief reactions by Sahlins himself (‘Birth Is the Metaphor’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18/3 (2012): 673–7), and by Bree Blakeman (‘Yolŋu Kinship and the Case for Extensionism: A Reply to Warren Shapiro’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18/3 (2012): 681–3). The former article is, in fact, a two-page quotation from Sahlins’ book – that is, precisely the passage on the metaphor character of birth. Apparently, Sahlins’ vehement polemics against the prevalence of the biologicistic views did not cause much uproar within anthropology. This makes one wonder even more about the precise front against which Sahlins is fighting. In 2013, a ‘Book Symposium’ in a special issue of the *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* was dedicated to Sahlins’ book with brief reactions by ten anthropologists, a minority of which oppose Sahlins’ views (*HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3/2 (2013): 245–316). Sahlins reacted to this symposium in the next issue (3/3, 333–47).

<sup>63</sup> For the references to his earlier work, see Warren Shapiro, ‘What Human Kinship Is Primarily About: Toward a Critique of the New Kinship Studies’, *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 16/2 (2008): 137–53, at 138n3. For Sahlins’ relation to ‘new kinship studies’, see Shapiro, ‘Extensionism’, 191.

<sup>64</sup> Shapiro, ‘What Human Kinship Is’, 140.

<sup>65</sup> Shapiro (‘What Human Kinship Is’, 137–8) refers to work from Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney (1995), Suzan McKinnon (1995a, 2000, 2001, 2005a) and Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values*.

bias inherent in this position has been amplified by a Marxist preoccupation favouring collectivist views over against individualist ones.<sup>66</sup> As regards kinship, this results in downplaying the importance of the nuclear family and procreative relations and interest in the prevalence of extended or performative views of kinship.

The philosopher Robert A. Wilson recently criticised in particular the post-Schneiderian idea that anthropology has liberated itself from the old bio-essentialist views of kinship that resulted from a Western bias.<sup>67</sup> Wilson calls this idea of a 'radical juncture' 'a kind of anthropological myth' because, in the actual practice of kinship research in both Western and non-Western settings, 'the biological facts that anchor kinship terminologies and concepts across all cultures' have not been abandoned ('Kinship Past', 573). The myth results from a projection of Western views. This projection concerns the Western family 'experimentations' of the 1960s and 1970s towards 'an extended or loosened concept of relatedness' and away from traditional patterns and roles presented as founded in biology. These developments resulted in a switch in anthropological terminology from 'kinship' to 'relatives' and 'relatedness'. This loosened concept was found to have existed all along in non-Western cultures.

Although Shapiro and Wilson try to analyse the suggested anthropological paradigm shift from a distance, their analyses also show that they are part of the polemics themselves. Shapiro's tone, in particular, is sometimes even more polemical than Sahlins', and his conclusions are much more sweeping than well-balanced, detailed analyses.<sup>68</sup> It is difficult to

<sup>66</sup> Shapiro, 'What Human Kinship Is', 148–9; 'Contesting Marshall Sahlins', 33. Shapiro does not give any explicit quotations from Friedrich Engels or other Marxist thinkers, but provides generalisations like 'the other main factor that distances many of the new kinship scholars from their own ethnographic materials is a commitment to Marxist theory, especially the hopelessly antiquated fantasies of Engels (1972[1884]) on the origin and development of the family' ('What Human Kinship Is', 148). More detailed references to Engels are found elsewhere: Warren Shapiro, 'A (P)lot of Marxist Crop: A Review Article', *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 35/1 (2009): 123–41; Warren Shapiro, 'Anti-family Fantasies in "Cutting-Edge" Anthropological Kinship Studies', *Academic Questions* 25/3 (2012): 394–402.

<sup>67</sup> Robert A. Wilson, 'Kinship Past, Kinship Present: Bio-essentialism in the Study of Kinship', *American Anthropologist* 118/3 (2016): 570–84.

<sup>68</sup> See in particular Shapiro ('Anti-family Fantasies' and 'What Human Kinship Is'), who attacks Susan McKinnon, in particular her chapter 'On Kinship and Marriage: A Critique of the Genetic and Gender Calculus of Evolutionary Psychology', in *Complexities: Beyond Nature and Nurture*, ed. by Susan McKinnon and Sydel Silverman (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 106–31. Robert Parkin characterises the latter article as sometimes 'pure polemics' ('What Shapiro and McKinnon Are All About, and Why Kinship Still Needs Anthropologists', *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17/2 (2009): 158–70, at 167). The former, however, is even more vehemently in style with, for example, its characterisation of the new kinship studies as 'the most startling display of scholarly incompetence in evidence within the academy' ('Anti-family Fantasies', 396) and of those



determine whether Shapiro has any companions in this battle, although he does give some references to others.<sup>69</sup> Without accepting their analyses as correct, Shapiro and Wilson are helpful in drawing attention to the context in which this anthropological debate takes place. This setting reveals that more is at stake than 'just' methodological issues of doing away with a Western bias in order to do justice to the diversity of the kinship practices. In the Western context, kinship is a controversial issue. It is experienced as changing in particular as regards its natural character. The controversy is about whether these are changes for the better. Anthropologists of the 'new kinship studies' clearly welcome the developments away from an understanding of kinship in natural terms and regard the 'traditional' views that stick to it as mistaken. Kinship has always been a cultural construct. By pointing out this context, Shapiro and Wilson also throw light on why the struggle against the biological views is not yet regarded as settled after more than thirty years of anthropological arguments against them. The controversy on how current Western family life should be valued is not over. Is it to be characterised as loosened due to an individualist view of being human? If so, is this a development to be favoured or not? The critics of the new kinship studies are helpful in making aware of this controversy. On the other hand, they also continue it. Shapiro and Wilson again draw attention to the biological character of kinship over against an understanding as 'made' or 'constructed'. Thus, the debate may continue on and on because each position clearly has its flaws.

This unsettled character of the anthropological debate again confirms the difficulty of making sense of what family might mean. In the so-called new kinship studies, there is much more sensitivity to this difficulty than in the ethical studies of Almond and Browning which favour the language of the natural. There is no hidden assumption that it is somehow obvious what kinship means, and what its most representative examples are. There is an openness to all kinds of family forms and even an interest in the less common forms. The difficulty of formulating what family might mean is, however, analysed as primarily the result of inappropriate scientific methodology and terminology. The difficulty is regarded as, to use Marcel's terms, a problem rather than a mystery. As we discovered, however, the new, supposedly more adequate terminology does not solve the problem

who practise it as mostly women who 'in their numerous self-congratulatory essays . . . call attention to the connections among their (hopelessly mistaken) analyses, "radical" feminism, and the all-female collective' (398).

<sup>69</sup> Shapiro ('What Human Kinship Is', 137–8) refers to Adam Kuper (1999), Mary Patterson (2005), and Akitoshi Shimizu (1991).

but leads to impasses. While emphasising that kinship is a construct, it is unable to make sense of the persistence of the language of the natural in the Western experiences of kinship, even in the context of reproductive technology or of the prevalence of birth language in non-Western settings in which kinship is all but a biological relationship. This 'unfitting language' clearly has the connotation of some kind of givenness. The problematic character of expressing givenness in terms of what is natural has come to light in our analyses, also thanks to the anthropological criticism. This does not mean, however, that it is not important to make sense of the experiences of kinship which this unfitting language expresses. This making sense must be developed in a reflection that goes beyond the opposition of what is 'given' to what is 'made', and thus beyond an opposition between nature and culture. In that sense, the moments of impasse are again fruitful in pointing to the need of a different kind of language and reflection.

The anthropological debate confirms that the experience of family as somehow given is not easy to acknowledge in our time: the anthropologists prefer to focus on the unfitting character of its expressions and do not elaborate on the experiences behind it. On the other hand, the ethnographic material offers ample expressions that stimulate a creative rethinking of givenness in categories not taken from biology or the sciences. In the final section, we take up these stimulating impulses and relate them to our earlier reflections on a balanced way of approaching the given character of family instigated by Rembrandt's Kassel painting and Koschorke's interpretation of the Holy Family. Our aim is to arrive at a different understanding of givenness, beyond the dichotomy of nature and culture. It is here that the notion of mystery may again prove its value.

### **Conclusion: Family as a 'Strong Image' and Taking Givenness Actively**

We introduced Rembrandt as an artist who consciously portrays the Holy Family in an everyday scene. This form of expression raises questions as to whether it domesticates the holy or glorifies the everyday. From this perspective, the entire artistic topos of the Holy Family can be seen as risky, oscillating between these two dangers. A different approach beyond this opposition opens, however, when taking into account precisely the tension created in the image by means of the painted frame and curtain. Koschorke's analysis of the Holy Family gives another impulse to an alternative view. He points at the Holy Family's character of a religious

symbol, which creates a new, in-between sphere between the holy and the profane or everyday. Such symbols express a connection of the sacred and the everyday in a different way than either domestication or glorification do. They do not fix the ordinary or the given as good but both take it seriously and invite to a creative rethinking. They point to the spiritual depth of the ordinary and thus inspire new meanings. In line with this view, the topos of the Holy Family need not be conceived of as suspended between the two dangers. This alternative, balanced path is relevant to our theme of givenness. For in the ethical reflections that highlight the given nature of family, we have seen similar dangers. In Browning's view of family as natural, religious symbols of relationships are hardly analysed for their specific meanings, but are interpreted as entirely in line with 'what works best'. In Almond, the dominant view of the natural as obvious fact left sacred meanings out of the picture. The latter was not the case in the anthropological views of Sahllins, but here the resistance against biologism left hardly any room for the idea of givenness. Now we have analysed different constructive and critical reflections on the given character of family, we return to the image with which we started. We will now approach it by means of an image theory that focusses precisely on the basic question of the specific character of the image. This will help us to elaborate on what alternatives Rembrandt's *Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain* may reveal for our interpretation of the givenness of family.

*Gottfried Boehm's 'Strong Image': The Importance of Not Obscuring  
the Boundaries of the Image*

The art historian and philosopher Gottfried Boehm focusses in his image theory on the question 'What is an image?'<sup>70</sup> Boehm is critical of two widespread ways of looking at images. First of all, there is the idea of the image as a *copy* (*Abbild*) of reality. As a copy, the image is nothing more than a secondary, empty depiction of reality, an illustration of speech ('Wiederkehr der Bilder', 16, 33). This is the way the image is presented

<sup>70</sup> Boehm's image theory reflects on the so-called iconic turn in philosophy, a reevaluation of the image and imagination since the 1990s partly initiated by Boehm himself. He underlines the importance of this turn, but he also scrutinises it critically, for it is not just any attention to the image itself that will make the iconic turn a substantial paradigm shift in philosophy that strengthens the image. Gottfried Boehm, 'Die Wiederkehr der Bilder', in *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. by Gottfried Boehm (Munich: W. Fink, 1994), 11–38; Gottfried Boehm, 'Jenseits der Sprache? Anmerkungen zur Logik der Bilder', in *Iconic Turn: Die neue Macht der Bilder*, ed. by Christa Maar and Hubert Burda (Cologne: DuMont, 2004), 28–43.

in the modern 'reproduction industry' (35), which is but one example of what is to be regarded as the 'historically most influential and widespread image practice' ('Jenseits der Sprache', 35). Second, the reproductive approach is intensified in the postmodern view in which the difference between image and reality disappears ('Wiederkehr der Bilder', 35). Here, the image is a *simulation* of reality in service to an 'illusionism' (12). Boehm acutely points out that these views – and corresponding applications of image – are, in the end, *iconoclastic* (12, 16). The 'simulation' approach overstrains the image, while the idea of 'copy' enfeebls it. This criticism reveals the normative character of Boehm's question of what an image is. He is looking for a certain type of image – that is, a non-iconoclast image. Images themselves include the options of either an image-friendly strengthening of the power of the image or an image-hostile neglect or erosion of it ('Wiederkehr der Bilder', 34f.). Boehm is thus on the lookout for criteria for the image-friendly or 'strong image'.

Boehm's search for the 'strong image' resonates with our investigation of the givenness of family. His struggle to get beyond the views of images as copy or simulation parallels our aim to get beyond the opposition of nature and culture, or given and made. The 'copy' view is found in the understanding of family as a natural relationship, in particular in its ethical elaboration that regards what is biologically given as good. On the other hand, the 'simulation' view regards family as a cultural construct. In this view, the experience of givenness does not have a legitimate place.

In order to understand what a 'strong image' may be, Boehm parallels the image 'in its true sense' to the metaphor that is part of language ('Wiederkehr der Bilder', 27ff.). 'Like the metaphor, the image is ambiguous, open to different interpretations at the same time, which cannot be summarised or paraphrased in a single expression. Nor, like the metaphor, can the image be dissected into its different elements without losing its power.' The ambiguous and complex character prevents a definitive conclusion or interpretation and thus makes the image intrinsically open. It is precisely through this openness that the image draws in listeners, readers or viewers: it invites them to interpret and acquire its meanings. These meanings can be communicated only through the image or metaphor itself.

Boehm summarises this power by which metaphor and image create their own specific meanings as the power to 'contrast' or the 'iconic difference' (29ff.). In the case of the metaphor, this contrast is the fertile, creative way in which the different words that are put together become related and create a surveyable whole, a linguistic image that is the result of the 'specific order of the words, breaks, inversions, or leaps'. In the

metaphor, a contrast remains between the meanings of the different elements or words and the meanings of the whole; at the same time, there is a new connection between the specific elements and a heterogeneity. In a similar way, the image in the visual arts is characterised by contrast: contrast is the image's precondition. In the most general or fundamental sense, the contrast in the image is between a surveyable surface as a unity, and the different elements within this unity. Furthermore, the contrast is one of time: the simultaneous perceptibility as a surface contrasts with the successiveness on the surface (30).

It is in this contrast, or 'iconic difference', that Boehm finds the key to answering the question: 'What is an image?' The singularity of the image, its way of creating a meaning of its own, lies in this contrast. Boehm also formulates it in terms of the interplay between what is depicted and its horizon or context, the determinate and the indeterminate as present in the visual arts. By means of the contrast, the material, a 'surface smeared with paint' (31), becomes an image and creates a surplus of meaning ('Jenseits der Sprache', 41). This way of understanding the image leads to the core of what an image is and thus to a criterion for the 'strong image'. The 'strong image' opens the viewer's eyes to something (32), to new meanings that exist only in the image. It is important to point out that this happens in the act of seeing. In this act, the different aspects and the whole come together without losing their difference; the image becomes completely image (41). In line with this view, Boehm characterises the 'strong image' as one in which its image character is always visible. In contrast to what happens in the case of copies and simulations, the boundaries of the imagery are not obscured in a 'strong image'. A 'strong image' is able 'to build up the iconic tension in a controlled way and to make it visible to the viewer. It lives out of precisely this double truth: to show something, also to feign something and at the same time to demonstrate the criteria and premises of this experience'.<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps we can summarise this character of the true image as 'honest'. The 'strong image' shows its character as image honestly and does not pretend to be an exact duplicate of the phenomenal world (copy) or completely equal to it with no difference between fact and fiction (simulation). The true image does not invite the viewer to submerge him- or

<sup>71</sup> 'Von diesen neuen Techniken [Photographie, Film, Videokunst] einen bildstärkenden Gebrauch zu machen, setze freilich voraus, die ikonische Spannung kontrolliert aufzubauen und dem Betrachter sichtbar werden zu lassen. Ein starkes Bild lebt aus eben dieser doppelten Wahrheit: etwas zu zeigen, auch etwas vorzutäuschen und zugleich die Kriterien und Prämissen dieser Erfahrung zu demonstrieren' ('Wiederkehr der Bilder', 35).

herself in the painting and forget about its image character. Rather, it incites the viewer to interpret the image, to become the location of the creation of new meanings by looking at it and being aware of one's viewing of the painting.

*Rembrandt's Holy Family with Painted Frame and Curtain  
as a 'Strong Image'*

One may easily present, as we saw, Rembrandt's paintings of the Holy Family as outstanding examples of the aforementioned *Verdiesseitigung* of the critical teaching of the Gospels and a veneration of the natural family. The presence of the curtain and frame in the Kassel version, however, calls to mind Boehm's thesis of the contrast or 'iconic difference' constitutive of the 'strong image'. Here, we seem to have a painting in which the boundaries of the image are anything but obscured: they are emphasised by the curtain and frame.<sup>72</sup> As a result, one becomes aware of one's position as a viewer of the painting. Can this painting therefore be called a 'strong image' that works in the double sense of 'showing' something and 'demonstrating the premises of its showing'? Two aspects of Boehm's theory in particular may deepen our understanding of the Kassel painting and its relevance for an alternative understanding of givenness.

First, its 'strong image' character may lie in the fact that the viewer is not tempted to become completely absorbed in the painting so that the difference between image and reality evaporates. The moment the viewer is inclined to become submerged in the apparent domestic idyll and forget about its image character, the frame and curtain prevent this by an estranging move that makes one aware of one's own viewing and interpreting position. This is not a copy of reality; it is an image. The frame and curtain, the explicit boundaries of the painting, also estrange the viewer from the scene itself: what is that we see here, a recognisable moment of everyday life, or one that is usually hidden, or a new reality called into being by the painting? This double estrangement could give rise to the question: why is this purely common scene worthy of being painted and viewed as

<sup>72</sup> In the Holy Family painting with the angels, Haverkamp-Begemann sees a dark edge along the bottom of the painting that was enlarged later. It makes it look like a space before the floor: the floor ends abruptly (*Rembrandt*, 20). According to Haverkamp-Begemann, similar demarcations of spaces are found only in Rembrandt's religious works, even when they do not seem 'entirely logical or practical' for the composition as such. He explains them as conferring special value upon the space in which the scene takes place and indicating that this is not our world, but that of the specific biblical scene.

a painting? This question may arise in particular as images of the profane family in a domestic setting were not a well-known theme in Rembrandt's time.<sup>73</sup> Thus, via the Holy Family, the common life receives unexpected attention. It is worthy of being contemplated as representing the holy. Does this mean, though, that everyday family life is idealised, even religiously sanctioned in these paintings? No, it may be shocking that the ordinary is worthy of being painted at all and, furthermore, worthy of representing the holy.

If we translate this aspect to our issue of givenness, the Kassel Holy Family may be said to invite us to view the ordinary as given. The viewer is invited to ponder on the deeper meanings of this aspect of our life, of being a family. The viewer is put in the mode or attitude of desecrating deeper meanings in reality or of taking the experience of such meanings seriously. It does so, however, without making the ordinary something good as such. Givenness as it is discovered in Rembrandt's 'strong image' of the Holy Family is not about the unalterable 'facts of life' that are proven to 'work best', but about the ways in which the holy or life as mystery can be traced in common aspects of life as it presents itself to people. Painting the Holy Family as an ordinary one definitely means intense attention to the ordinary family that is represented. It is precisely in this everyday family that the sacred is revealed, but family is not as such sacred or good. Rather, it surprises or even shocks that it is possible to bring the ordinary and the divine together. It raises questions. Here we arrive at the second aspect.

The second relevant aspect of the 'strong image' is that it cannot be explained or translated completely into words, but speaks for itself in its own image-like way. It preserves the iconic 'contrast' or 'difference': the impressiveness of the sober family scene and the estranging effect of the curtain. This is the main contrast that, according to Rembrandt, is suited to letting the viewer imagine the Holy Family. As such, it stimulates interpretation and reflection. This interpretation may start from a certain recognition the painting evokes by the common, familiar character of the scene: I may suddenly see myself or my own children in the cradle, myself as a parent, as well as my own parents watching over me. Thus, the painting may touch on the experiences of the viewer, experiences of intimacy, care and attention that have or have not been present in one's own family. It may give cause to wonder about the fact that Christian belief honours a God who has become human in such a way that God also needed this care and was dependent upon others. The painting incites one to

<sup>73</sup> Haverkamp-Begemann, *Rembrandt*, 13, referring to Frans Floris' *Holy Family* (1550/60).



contemplate the incarnation, the idea that everyday human reality is the place where Christ was born, that Christ could be lying in our cradle. Rembrandt invites us to reflect on, even to experience oneself, how the *Diesseits* (this-worldly) may display a *Jenseits* (a beyond), where perfectly common facts reveal deeper meanings. The contrast that remains visible in the painting thus invites to interpret the ordinary as somehow given without fixing this givenness.

*Taking Family as a 'Strong Image' in Order to Account for Givenness  
as Mystery*

Understanding Rembrandt's Kassel painting as a 'strong image' thus helps to formulate a different sense of givenness, beyond the obvious dangers. This 'strong image' invites the viewer to regard or experience the ordinary family as meaningful without fixing this meaning. Viewing this painting may make one aware of other experiences of family as given. These experiences reveal this aspect of life, this phenomenon, as meaningful, or even as having a surplus of meaning, something that must be taken seriously. But this taking seriously, and this surplus of meaning, is not something the family embodies in a definitive sense. Taking family as given should be done in such a way that the image character is preserved. The family is an image of a deeper meaning, but it is not itself, as such, this deeper meaning. This experience of givenness happens in the act of seeing, in a moment. Taking these moments as experiences of givenness means accepting the invitation which they embody to be put one in the mode or attitude of desiring a deeper meaning in the ordinary. This attitude may be associated with Marcel's catching 'a glimpse of the meaning of the sacred bond which it is man's lot to form with life'.

This interpretation of givenness raises the question of whether givenness has any special relation to the phenomenon of family. Can other aspects of human life not also be an invitation to discover deeper meanings in a similar way? By approaching the family as a phenomenon that confronts us in our time with the given side of life, we do not claim that it is unique in doing so. On the other hand, it is not by chance that at present this givenness is discovered precisely in the family. The family is a phenomenon that pre-eminently embodies what may be called a structure of life. Despite their enormous variety, family relations share a character of shaping or ordering life. This order usually feels like an order that presents itself to people, not an order that one must first shape or build from scratch. In this sense, one may even call human beings 'family beings', although this is only

one aspect of their being human. But what does it mean to be a 'family being'? The family confronts people with the idea that life is structured and not completely open and without form. It is not by chance that kinship has, from the very first studies, attracted the attention of anthropologists who want to understand foreign cultures. It is not far-fetched to see a structure in kinship that may be comparable between cultures. Thus, family confronts one pre-eminently with what we called earlier the 'other side of freedom', and thereby puts one on the track of givenness. At least, that is what family confronts us with in our peculiar Western setting in which givenness has become a difficult notion due to the dominance of the perspective of free choice.

A second reason why precisely the family puts us on this track of givenness seems to lie in what Marcel called its embodiment of the human bond with life. It is the site where new life may appear and where life is passed on. Through the possibility of having children, a couple is placed in a sphere greater than just the two of them. Family is a setting that puts people in relation to ancestors and future descendants, and thus life can be experienced as stretching beyond oneself. Family can remind one of being a child of others and can thus make one experience life as a gift to be respected. Family is a sphere that people do not primarily experience as something arranged by themselves, but as something that opens up, that is there, given. Perhaps this is why Rembrandt prefers the scene of the family with their young child. In particular, when new life comes into being, the bond with life itself may be experienced.

These interpretations of family as given may finally be summarised and specified by relating them to the character of the family as mystery. First, experiencing family as given is now understood as implying a specific attitude. It is the attitude of approaching the world as not only a 'matter of fact', but also, at certain moments, in certain phenomena, as mystery. This attitude implies that reality is taken utterly seriously. It takes reality as hiding a deeper meaning which goes beyond it but is nevertheless traced in it. Thus, the ordinary becomes an image of something greater, which may even have connotations of the sacred. Experiencing givenness means becoming a viewer of this 'strong image', and thus feeling invited or even urged to descry a 'beyond' or a 'depth'. Experiencing this givenness thus implies an active attitude. This attitude takes on moral weight in that it determines how people take their place within this world, what they regard as their responsibilities and tasks. If one takes the world as given in this sense, one does not think of oneself as acting from nowhere, or primarily on the basis of one's own decisions. Givenness, then, is about trying to

fathom the situation, life as it is, the people by whom one is surrounded down to their deeper meanings, the appeal hidden in them. These meanings or appeal incite one to act in a way that takes them into account. However – and this is the second point – givenness does not mean that this acting in answer to the appeal is fixed and clear. Its character as mystery again emphasises this. The active attitude presupposed in experiencing givenness means that one still has to find out how one will answer this invitation to find a deeper meaning. Family is a 'strong image' in that it makes us attentive to mystery and invites to creative interpretations of this dimension. Trying to find one's own interpretation of the appeals or invitations family embodies is taking it seriously as given.

Our analyses of the ethical and anthropological views of family show that both of these aspects are difficult to deal with in our time. In the anthropological debate, we discovered the strong resonance of the view of family as something that is not steady, inflexible or fixed. The view of family as something set and unalterable evokes strong opposition. This sensitive character of the givenness of family shows that something is at stake in it. It is difficult to make sense of the experiences of givenness in the light of obvious ideals of individual freedom and the autonomy of choice. The overreaction in the polemical anthropological stances on the issue of the suggested naturalness of family seems understandable from this sensitivity of the topic. The ethical approaches to family as natural, on the other hand, bring to light the opposite reaction. If one does give room to the idea of family as given, this easily results in the desire to fix its givenness. The language of the natural is then used to claim the obviousness of the good of the intact, so-called biological family. It is underpinned by references to facts with the status of being scientifically proven. This way of dealing with the given side of life does not invite creative interpretations of what the family tie might mean in each concrete situation. It is rather concerned with stating the givenness. Both ways of solving the difficulty of experiences of family as given lack an awareness of its character as mystery.

In analysing the different ethical and anthropological positions, however, we also found opposing tendencies in all of them that do not fit completely into these dominant ways of thinking and lead to impasses. There are reflections in all of them that display a certain awareness of the character of the givenness of family as mystery, of the difficulty of naming what givenness might mean. Almond acknowledges this unnameability at certain moments, even though they are not well integrated into her argument. Browning struggles with the specificity of religious symbols and their value in understanding what family might mean. Strathern and

Franklin bring to light the persistence of the language of the natural. Strangely enough, the most constructive elaboration of this character of mystery is found in Sahlins, despite his fierce polemics with the view of family as fixed by biology or procreation. He highlights new concepts to make sense of the kinship practices he finds in ordinary life. His elaboration of kinship as 'mutuality of being' points out the intense, intimate sharing of life that characterises kinship. Terms like 'mystical interdependence' and the examples of kin who 'immediately feel' each other's experiences also recall the analyses of Butler and Ciavatta. In Chapter 4, we deal with the question of whether it is possible to further specify what this inextricable sharing of each other's life among family members means concretely by understanding how dependence is at stake in the sphere of family.